

Adapting Shakespearean Drama for and in the Middle East: Process and Product

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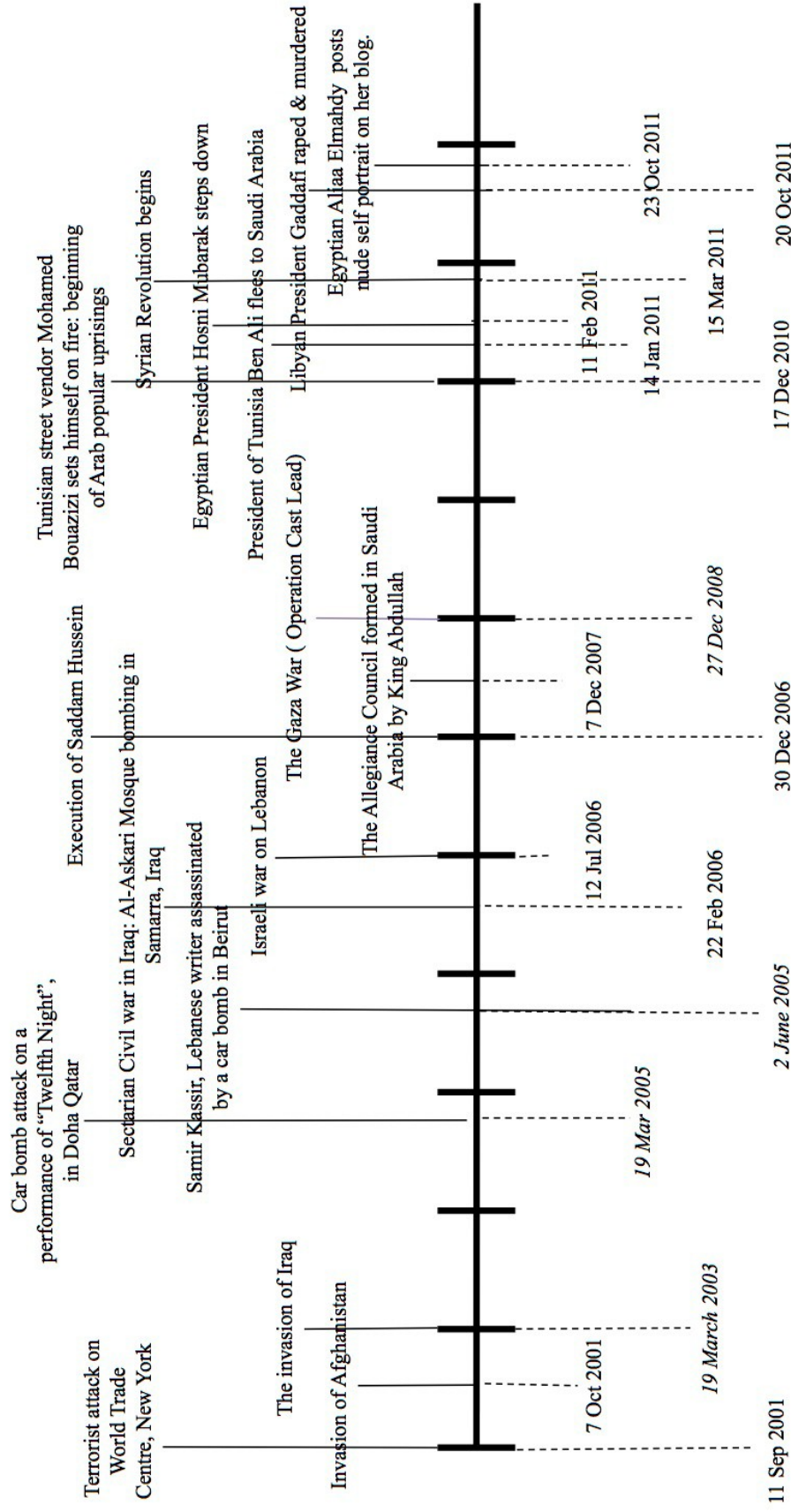
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Abstract: This dissertation chronicles the development of a series of plays, collectively referred to as *The Arab Shakespeare Trilogy*, from the perspective of their playwright Sulayman Al-Bassam. Together, *The Al-Hamlet Summit* (2002-2005), *Richard III*, *An Arab Tragedy* (2007-2009), and *The Speaker's Progress* (2011-2012) register the eruptive social, political, and cultural contexts of the Arab world during the first decade of the twenty-first century while negotiating the adaptation of Shakespeare's plays to a form thought-provoking and entertaining to audiences both within and outside the Middle East. The document outlines the inception of the project, which includes both personal and historical context, and provides more specific commentary on the production of each play individually. In addition to its focus on the specific impact of 9/11, and its global consequences, on the development of these dramatic works, it attends to topics including the technical and ideological challenges of linguistic and cultural translation, the adaptation of Shakespeare in Arabic theatre, the politics of art and drama in the Arab world, and the involvement of art in the shaping of the ethics of cross-cultural representation. Of particular interest are the linguistic conditions bearing upon the adaptation of English language texts into multi-lingual and cross-cultural works, the effects of the globalisation of politics and media, and the international touring life of the plays between the Arab region and wider world. The play texts of the *Trilogy* make up the second part of the document. The methodology of this dissertation deploys historical contextualisation, autobiographical memoir, literary analysis and creative improvisation. The play-texts are dramatic adaptations of specific Shakespeare texts to the Arab world.

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Timeline of Conflict in the Middle East



The Al-Hamlet Summit

Richard III – An Arab Tragedy

The Speaker's Progress

The touring life of each production in the Trilogy.

Process: The History of *The Arab Shakespeare Trilogy*

Ensemble This is a tale.

Actor 5 And we are actors.

Actor 3 We performed it so that, together with you, we would learn from it.

Actor 7 Do you now know why elephants exist?

Actress 3 Do you now know why elephants breed?

Actor 5 Yet our tale is only the beginning.

Actor 4 When elephants breed, a new tale begins.

Ensemble A bloody, violent tale... A tale to perform, all of us together, when next we meet.¹

Prelude

Thus speak the actors to the audience in the final moments of Saadallah Wannous's *The Elephant, the King of All Time* (1969). In this play, the King's pet elephant brings chaos to the local village, stomping the life out of village children, as a metaphor for violent political oppression. When the villagers attempt to petition the King to confine the elephant, they are met with resistance from guards and ministers (those who benefit from the elephant's brutality) and can only suggest, in the end, that the elephant be given a mate. The villagers seem destined to suffer from the continued destruction wrought by the King's pet. Yet, these final lines from the ensemble indicate a knowing, if hesitant, conviction: with every generation of elephants comes opportunity to begin anew—or, at least, continue the bloody, violent, fight.

More than four decades after *The Elephant*, the 'new tale' that Wannous imagined, the tale in which we all would be actors, the tale that would bring consolation and vindication, came. The coming of the popular Arab uprisings known as the Arab Spring² in the early days of 2011 made the clocks that stood still as coffins tick again, releasing the living and avenging the wronged. The portraits that Doomsday itself could not have

¹ Wannous, S 1996, *al-Fil ya Malik al-Zaman* [The Elephant, the King of All Time], in *al-Amal al-Kamilah* [The Complete Works], pp. 578-79, Al Ahali.

² The 'Arab Spring' is a name given to a series of violent and non-violent revolutionary movements and demonstrations in the Arab world, beginning with the Tunisian Revolution in January 2011 with the ousting of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali and spreading to the nations of the Arab League.

unhooked from public buildings, hotel lobbies, theatre arches, and tobacconist shops were ripped from walls and stamped underfoot. The specimen jar that the Arab world floated in, like a nineteenth-century homunculus, fell onto the floor of history and smashed. A door opened, and something new and totally other entered the tale. Spring came because the young outnumbered the old; because the young, though literate, did not fear death; and because elephants, whips, bullets, and torture chairs can only suppress ignominy, hunger, and rage for so long.

With the arrival of Spring came untold upheavals across the Arab World and, also, the dramatic collapse of *The Arab Shakespeare Trilogy*, a body of work and collective of artists that sought to capture the spirit of an age leading up to this moment of revolution. This thesis chronicles the development of these plays, *The Al-Hamlet Summit* (2002-2005),³ *Richard III, An Arab Tragedy* (2007-2009),⁴ and *The Speaker's Progress* (2011-2012),⁵ which register the eruptive cultural and political history of the Arab world during the first decade of the twenty-first century. I will begin with a general outline of the inception of the project, which includes both personal and historical context, before providing more specific commentary on the production of each play individually. Given their entwined historical, political, and thematic concerns, there often will be places of necessary integration. Rare are the moments when I was able to concentrate solely on one project or another. Also, because the creative process is one that cannot always be articulated plainly, even after the work is complete, in the case of *Richard III, an Arab Tragedy*, I have chosen to include a selection of material written in tandem to the writing and production of the play. There is a personal letter to a dearly departed friend, a short story, and an account of the extra-textual, political conditions of performance.⁶ These bits of text, though in a different register, capture intimate and candid

³ Touring dates, *The Al Hamlet Summit*: Edinburgh International Fringe Festival, Cairo International Festival of Experimental Theatre (2002); Tokyo International Arts Festival, Bath Shakespeare Festival, Riverside Studios (London), Seoul Performing Arts Festival (2004); the Hamlet Summer Festival (Elsinore), Singapore Arts Festival, Fajr International Theater Festival (FITF, Tehran) (2005).

⁴ Touring dates, *Richard III: An Arab Tragedy*: The Royal Shakespeare Company's Complete Works Festival (Swan), the Attiki Society Festival (Athens) (2007); Al Maidan Theatre (Kuwait), Damascus Capital of Arab Culture Festival, Les Bouffes du Nord (Paris), Holland Festival (Amsterdam) (2008); Brooklyn Academy of Music (BAM), Kennedy Center (Washington, DC), Al Ain, Abu Dhabi, Sharjah (2009).

⁵ Touring dates, *The Speaker's Progress*: Al Maidan Cultural Centre, Le Tournesol Theatre (Beirut), the Next Wave Festival at Brooklyn Academy of Music (BAM), Arts Emerson: The World On Stage (Boston) (2011); Les Journées Théâtrales de Carthage (Tunis & Sousa), D-CAF Festival (Cairo), Al Shamiya Theatre (Kuwait), Holland Festival (Amsterdam) (2012).

⁶ These pieces are also included in the Bloomsbury edition of *The Arab Shakespeare Trilogy* (2014).

moments in the production of *Richard III, an Arab Tragedy*, and create a more complete picture of the moment in history that shaped its life and the life of its playwright.

Enter Ghost

When Wannous departed this world in 1997, I was working in Europe, grappling with the living legacies of Peter Brook, Robert Wilson, and Frank Castorf; becoming intrigued by Romeo Castellucci, Forced Entertainment, Tadeusz Kantor, and Lev Dodin; and feeling nonplussed by new British realism. I wanted to make trouble for the great tradition of European theatre. In 1997, I thought little about the challenges facing the Arab dramatist. I was a London-based theatre-maker, engaged with post-modern Europe and blissfully insouciant of my alterity.

It wasn't until 9/11 that I saw that alterity. In the fallout of the terrorist attacks on Manhattan and Washington, DC, lines were drawn among cities and ethnicities across the Western world. Overnight, my looks, my language, and my name became sources of interrogation and suspicion. I was poised between two cultures with a sense of identity defined as much by non-assimilation and non-belonging as by any unified narrative of tribe, culture, language, or history. I began to make tentative descriptions of the Arab world, in English, presenting this work in Kuwait, Tunis, and London; I was being drawn back in. By the time I presented the first, fully conceived version of *The Al Hamlet Summit* at the Edinburgh Festival in the summer of 2002, I was already living back in Kuwait, where convoys of US tanks were lining up in preparation for the impending Invasion/Liberation of Iraq.

The spectacular destruction of the Twin Towers spawned a two-headed serpent. The ideological poisons of Neo-Conservatism and Salafi jihadism fused to form a gargantuan and terrible beast. The beast devoured words, bodies, and nations, enflaming sectarian tensions and scorching the very earth that might have sheltered dialogue between neighbours, communities, and civilizations. In the vacuum created by the collapse of the Twin Towers, the Arab-Islamic world was sucked into the global arena, as the West became increasingly and precariously curious.

The fallout from 9/11 created global debris: the War on Terror, the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, the Israeli Apartheid Wall, al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia, the Danish Cartoons Episode, etc. Local events, perfectly, in my opinion, analysable in their local contexts, were hyperbolized and refracted via news networks around the globe, leading to inexplicable and uncontrollable consequences. More than ever, experience as lived and

experience as relayed were becoming indistinguishable. The virtual and the real intersected as globalization became part of genes, fate, and continuum.

Nonetheless, like the Sleepers in the Cave,⁷ the governments and rulers of the Arab world persisted, unperturbed in their earthly slumbers. By the end of the first decade of the new millennium, it seemed that the Arab world had reached the nadir of time. The combined age of the heads of state of the countries of the Arab League rivalled the historical age of Islam itself. So-called ‘Republics’ were being fattened up and handed from father to son like Golden Calves.⁸ Decades of cronyism, authoritarianism, Western opportunism, and administrative corruption seemed to have led to an irrevocable brain drain and an irreversible shredding of the fabric of tolerance within Arab societies. But such bad times for living create rich pickings for the dramatist.

From this global debris, I sought to create theatre. The creation of the plays covered by this thesis began after 9/11 and continued through January 2011, a month that saw the Tunisian Revolution and birth of Arab Spring. The plays are informed and inflected by concerns, issues, and events pertaining to my perception of the Arab world during that first decade of the twenty-first century. They also address the charged, airless, and, at times, perverse relationship between the Middle East and the West.

After 9/11, I re-joined the Arab world, moving back to Kuwait, and found myself in a place where the logic of linear time could hide—and remain hidden. Despite having broached the new millennium, time went into darker and darker spirals, and for more than a decade, it seemed that time in the Arab world was moving backwards. Despite our ancient history as a global centre for education and enlightenment, we re-entered an age of crusades, finding ourselves in the midst of jihadist warriors, messianic discourse, book burning, witch hunting, and bloodthirsty demagoguery. In a part of the world that once disseminated the great works of Aristotle, free thought and discourse became viewed with increasing suspicion. ‘The University has long been the source of regressive trends amongst us’, Gertrude tells Hamlet in *The Al-Hamlet Summit*. ‘Your father and I have deemed it council to keep you away from such throbbing beds of lunacy’ (*The Al-Hamlet Summit*, Act I, Scene 1). But it is the inheritance of a ‘rotten’, war-torn, and traitorous political system that drives Hamlet toward fanaticism.

⁷ ‘Sleepers in the Cave’ (*Ahl al Kahf*) is the Muslim equivalent to the Seven Sleepers tale, in which a group of brothers fall asleep in a cave for three centuries. See *The Quran*, Surah 18, *al Kahf*.

⁸ The golden calf is a symbol of pagan idolatry according to the Book of Exodus and *The Quran*, Surah 20, *Ta ha*.

Once back in this world, my work began to traverse new texts and genres and brought me into dialogue with several different authors. I worked with Heiner Müller and the British dramatist Torben Betts to attempt a response to the Invasion of Iraq. I worked on Moliere's *Tartuffe*, satirizing religious hypocrisy in Gulf society. I studied iconic figures from Islamic history like Ibn Al Muqaffa to find ways of dramatizing the impulse that drives societies towards sectarian bloodbaths. The most ambitious and consequent of these projects has been the Shakespearean cycle of works.⁹ These pieces, which began as individual projects, each depart from a Shakespearean text, and, over time (unconsciously at first but then with increasing self-awareness), they became an interrelated and unified body of work. *The Al Hamlet Summit*, *Richard III*, *an Arab Tragedy*, and *The Speaker's Progress*, collectively framed as *The Arab Shakespeare Trilogy*, were all made from the events and currents that informed the period between 2001 and 2011. The *Trilogy* is a progeny of the globalized era, and rather than allowing that lineage to eliminate dialogue and annihilate meaning, I, alongside a dedicated and talented team of collaborators, strove to transform the condition of globalization into a liberating architecture through which to actualize a new form of Arab political theatre. Through a mixture of necessity, chance, and design, the plays in the *Trilogy* were developed through international collaborations and partnerships that consciously implicated the resultant productions in the economy—and politics—of global culture.

The three plays are built, in varying degrees, out of Shakespearean coffins, or caskets. They draw heavily on the structure, characterization, and tenor of their Shakespearean sources and are explorations of themes found specifically in *Hamlet*, *Richard III*, and *Twelfth Night*. Extremism, corruption, power, kingship, identity, authoritarianism, and sexuality are but a handful of the themes that attracted me to these texts. They are themes that exhibited promise as vehicles for politically charged, contemporary theatre pieces. But the conditions of creation and the radical violence of the world around me at the time of writing imparted a second, more urgent and highly contemporary, prerogative for these plays. This urgency and relevance that I was feeling led them to betray their Shakespearean context, flowing explicitly into the particular moment of history—and geography—in which they were made. Because of this, the plays carry the markings of the War on Terror, the Axis of Evil, Al Qaeda, Al-Jazeera, the birth of unfettered sectarian violence, invasions of foreign armies, oil

⁹ In addition to the Shakespearean adaptations, other projects at the time included *Trading* (2003), a fraught love story that exposed the challenges that young people face in the Gulf; *Melting the Ice* (2003), a response to the American-led liberation/occupation of Iraq that brought together actors from Iraq, Kuwait, Great Britain, and the United States; *The Mirror for Princes: Kalila Wa Dimna*, an adaptation of the allegorical animal fables of *Kalila Wa Dimna* and a call for the return of tolerance; and the direction of *Hayyal Bu Tair*, a Gulf comedy inspired by Moliere's *Tartuffe*, adapted Kuwaiti satirist Jaafar Rajab.

at 130 dollars a barrel, military dictatorships, petro-fattened decadence, the collapse of old orders, and the blasting effect of post-modernity on pre-modern societal structures. The tension between the persisting Shakespearean text and the history that I felt needed telling is the defining principle of these plays.

The peculiar conditions of production that led to the creation and distribution of these works accentuate this tension. The plays were written and developed inside the Arab world for performance at international venues in other continents. *The Al-Hamlet Summit*, first presented in English at the Edinburgh Festival, was remade between Kuwait and Damascus for performance at the Tokyo International Festival; *Richard III* was commissioned by the Royal Shakespeare Company in the UK and made between Kuwait and Beirut; *The Speaker's Progress* was made in Damascus, Kuwait, and Beirut and received its world premiere at the Brooklyn Academy of Music in New York.¹⁰ Here was war: there, peace. Here were rampant poverty and obscurantism: there were mild social tensions and universal literacy rates. And, as if by chance, here came Democracy proudly rolling in on the back of a tank. The radical disconnect between what was happening inside the Arab world (see the timeline that prefaces this thesis) and the relative stability and tranquillity of the cities where the works were scheduled to receive their premieres became a mirror, in my mind, of the disconnect between the Shakespearean plays and the new tale I was preparing.

When discussing *The Arab Shakespeare Trilogy*, I am often asked to distinguish between its method(s) and the standard adaptive strategies used regularly by directors when transposing Shakespeare plays into contemporary settings and translating them into other languages. In the standard adaptive approach, Shakespeare's plays are used as vehicles to shed light on questions of contemporary relevance. Take, for example, the production of *Henry V*, directed by Nicholas Hytner and presented at the English National Theatre in 2003. In this production, Henry V's rash and blustering invasion of France is appropriated to satirize the contemporaneous American and British invasion of Iraq. The director describes his reading of the play's main character as 'a charismatic young British leader who commits his troops to a dangerous foreign invasion for which he has to struggle to find justification in international law'.¹¹ From this directorial reading or vision, settings and signifiers are curated for a production that will allow the Shakespearean play to allegorize the contemporary moment: the battle of Agincourt becomes an allegory for the battle for Baghdad.

¹⁰ The staged productions, in their entirety, can be viewed online as part of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's *Global Shakespeares* Archive. See <http://globalshakespeares.mit.edu/arab-world/#>

¹¹ N Hytner 2003, "Once more unto the breach," *The Telegraph Newspaper*, 10 May.

Once the directorial vision is established, the artillery of theatre (set, costumes, casting, effects) are, in turn, deployed to create a conversation between the historical piece of drama and the contemporary moment of history. In this way, a Shakespearean play is transplanted into the contemporary landscape. This method is a top down one, in which the outer framework of the play is altered to match the directorial purpose, and the text of the play itself remains wholly intact. There is a sanctuary of stillness maintained at the level of the text as if it was a timeless, sacred body of meaning that willingly illuminates different epochs in function of the ingenuity of the garb that dresses it. Scholars have noted that this has been especially true of Arab adaptations of Shakespeare, where works actively cater to an audience's curiosities and expectations regarding contemporary politics. The experience of the audience becomes 'forensic' as the play is 'deemed representative' and, 'is used to explain a situation in one socio-political geographic space to the inhabitants of another' (Litvin, 2016, p. 3). The allegorical scope of this standard directorial approach is limited and pre-defined: all may be altered, made anew and reconceived, except the text.

In contrast to this, the method adopted in *The Arab Shakespeare Trilogy* starts from the bottom up. Indeed, the chosen adaptive context can impact the choice of set, costumes, and plastic signifiers of the production but, in that process, the text itself is also liable to 'splinter and be reconstituted', as Margaret Litvin describes the journey of Hamlet through the Arab world (Litvin, 2011b, p. 1). The use of allegory to create double meaning is still operative in this method, but its limits are not pre-defined. Characters and language embody the transformational energy of the adaptive context, and the effects of adaptation are no longer limited to the level of directorial vision, set, or costume. Instead they are liberated for morphing the deeper level of language itself. The question then becomes not, how does *Henry V*, as Shakespeare wrote it, speak to us in the context of a contemporary Western invasion of Iraq, rather, what do the energies, contradictions and questions of Shakespeare's *Henry V* speak like from within the historical moment of Iraq being invaded? This process of adaptation is more akin to what Walter Benjamin describes in his essay 'The Task of the Translator: An Introduction to the Translation of Baudelaire's *Tableaux Parisiens*'. Literature being more than a 'message', Benjamin writes, 'a translation that seeks to transmit something can transmit nothing other than a message—that is, something inessential' (1997, p. 151). The translation and the original are incommensurable: 'no translation would be possible if, in accord with its ultimate essence, it were to strive for similarity to the original. For in its continuing life, which could not be so called if it were not the transformation and renewal of a living thing, the original is changed' (p. 155). He defines the task of the translator as 'to

find the intention toward the language into which the work is to be translated, on the basis of which an echo of the original can be awakened in it' (p. 159). The 'intention' is located here in the language of the translation, not in the original. 'The translation's language can, indeed must free itself from bondage to meaning, in order to allow its own mode of *intentio* to resound, not as the *intentio* to reproduce, but rather as harmony, as a complement to its language in which language communicates itself' (p. 161).

'Translation' and 'adaptation' here go hand in hand, as 'intention' and as 'complement'. Like the translation, the adaptation does not seek to reproduce the original, but to complement it, finding an intention that belongs not to the original, but to the context of the adaptation. Pierre Bourdieu provides another useful theoretical paradigm in his notion of 'genetic sociology', a relational model of cultural production that 'problematizes the social conditioning of cultural works'. Bourdieu's methodology is here defined by Sameh Hanna:

[Genetic sociology] ... locates these practices in a social universe of available positions to be occupied by agents with particular dispositions. Thus conceived, Bourdieu's relational model guarantees a multi-directional understanding of socio-cultural practices that takes into consideration not only the objective structure of the cultural field within which they are produced, but also the trajectories of the agents who contribute to the making of these practices. Genetic sociology, in a word, takes issue with the linearity of teleological reasoning which posits that socio-cultural practice is the mechanical response to a unitary stimulus. Instead, it conceives of this practice in terms of multiple causation and as the product of the dialectical relation between objective social structures and the subjectivity of social agents. (2005, p. 169)

Graham Holderness has applied this theoretical tool to *The Arab Shakespeare Trilogy* by posing the apparently simple question of 'authorship' (Holderness, 2008). 'In what sense', Holderness asks, 'is Sulayman Al-Bassam the "author", or to use Pierre Bourdieu's term the "originating consciousness" (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 193) of *The Al-Hamlet Summit* or *Richard III: an Arab Tragedy*?':

Works such as these display a complex and hybrid genealogy in which we see marks of their affinity with Shakespeare, in both English and Arabic translations; with Al-Bassam himself, who performs a number of functions – writer, translator, adapter, director, impresario, even actor (he played a role in *An Arab Tragedy* at Stratford); with generic contexts such as European

political theatre, whose influence entered Arab culture from Eastern rather than Western Europe; and from contemporary Arabic writing, especially poetry. As we see even the writer, who will seem the most fixed point in this matrix, presents a shifting and volatile subjectivity: bilingual; both originating writer and adapting dramaturg; both theatrical entrepreneur and performer; both inside and outside the productions. It is no more possible to predicate a linear relationship between writer and work than it is with Shakespeare (who was also of course both dramatist and poet, both an inveterate adapter and an original writer, both a theatrical entrepreneur and an actor in his own plays). (Holderness, 2008, p. 73)

Holderness suggests that Bourdieu's concept of 'trajectory', 'the series of positions successively occupied by the same writer in the successive states of the literary field' (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 189) is a better theoretical paradigm than any conventional notion of 'authorship' or 'translation'. This theoretical move frees up the writer in a way parallel to Benjamin's liberation of the translation from the original. The emphasis shifts from reproduction to adaptation, from fidelity of transmission to re-making.

Another theoretical term I and others have found useful in this context is Gérard Genette's distinction between 'hypertext' and 'hypotext'. Genette uses the term 'hypertext' for any appropriation or adapted text, while 'hypotext' signifies the source text of any appropriation or rewriting. Adaptation studies have demonstrated that adaptations never remain within the 'source' that motivated them, but escape from its control and modify our response to the source itself. Julie Sanders asserts that 'we need to view literary adaptation and appropriation from [a] positive vantage point, seeing it as creating new cultural and aesthetic possibilities that stand alongside the texts which have inspired them' (2006, p. 41). Sanders also distinguishes between 'an adaptation', which 'signals a relationship with an informing source text', and an appropriation, which 'frequently effects a more decisive journey away from the informing source into a wholly new cultural product and domain' (2006, p. 26). Similarly, Genette argues that a 'hypertext' often transforms, modifies and elaborates on the 'hypotext' (1997, pp. 5,6).

Several critics have applied Genette's distinction to the plays of the *Arab Shakespeare Trilogy*, with contrasting results. Writing on *The Al-Hamlet Summit*, Omayya Khalifa (Khalifa, 2017) finds in the adaptation a positive engagement between source and appropriation:

Al-Bassam presents his audience with a heteroglossic text in which different styles of discourse are interwoven. The play is written in contemporary

English and employs political and military jargon, thus localizing the Shakespearean text and altering its thematic emphasis ... The play at the same time cleverly emulates Shakespeare's style and phraseology, and employs resonant words and phrases that allude to concepts and episodes in the original text ... concepts intrinsic to Shakespeare's world remind the audience that they are moving back and forth between a hypotext and a hypertext. (2017, pp. 184-85)

On the other hand, Magda Hasabelnaby has deployed Genette's distinction to assert that *The Al-Hamlet Summit* fails to effect a clean break with the source text, and remains imprisoned within its restrictive parameters.¹² She asks whether the play has 'managed to move from mere adaptation to critical appropriation and from honorary replication of the Hamletian hypotext' to a genuine 'hypertext' that conducts to 'new literary terrains?':

Al-Bassam has not only applied western classical heritage to the historical moment of the Arabs, but has also heavily relied on a western perspective regarding 'the Arab character'. By choosing Hamlet in particular to become his Arab tragic hero, Al-Bassam seems to conform to certain definitions of the 'other' and the 'self' in western consciousness ... The character of Hamlet, as drawn by Shakespeare and employed by Al-Bassam in his play, matches to a great extent the prevailing stereotype of the Arab and the Moslem in Western orientalist consciousness ... Al-Bassam's play has not aspired to change, let alone to challenge, the predominant stereotypes or to propose an alternative vision. Al-Bassam's *Al-Hamlet Summit* (2006) has only adapted the classical text applying it to the status quo in the Arab world and relocating it into a different chronotope. This has resulted in an interesting adaptation which, nevertheless, obeys the 'original' text without subverting or evaluating its general canon. (Hasabelnaby, 2011, n.p.)

Annaliese Connolly endorses this critique in a study of the 2011 film *Richard III: An Arab V.I.P.*, arguing that my theatre practice continually risks 'pandering to stock images of the contemporary Middle East' (2013, p. 164), and 'reveals some dubious assumptions about Arab culture and society' (p. 162). Tanjil Rashid, on the other hand, while objecting to what he sees as a residual Orientalism, concludes that *Richard III: An Arab Tragedy* managed to create 'authentic Arab theatre':

¹² See also RK Al-Khallili 2012, who calls *Richard III: an Arab Tragedy* 'a play lost in translation and adaptation' (p. 45).

Even al-Bassam's *Richard III* was hijacked by references to the Koran, kohl and camels (what to expect from a director whose *Al-Hamlet Summit* depicted Ophelia as a suicide bomber?). In creating authentic Arab theatre out of a history play set during that most iconically English period, the War of the Roses, it was for this one critic a meta-meditation on the mobility of literature between England and the Arab world. (Rashid, 2012, n.p.)

Sean Aita, more subtly, shows how *The Speaker's Progress* operates to liberate the radical potentiality of Shakespeare's play, which would otherwise function as mere Orientalism:

Sulayman Al-Bassam's *The Speaker's Progress* ... presents *Twelfth Night* as a revolutionary text. I believe that he has read the play correctly. It is possible to identify a challengingly positive view of an Islamic state within the text, and although the marriages at the end of the play provide an ambiguous and unresolved ending, they can be considered one of the earliest stage representations of intercultural relationships. *The Speaker's Progress* confronts its audience with a fundamental question: how are we to live together? *Twelfth Night* presents us with the same dilemma. The heart of Illyria's 'natural perspective that is and is not' (5.1.2416) acknowledges that 'what's to come is still unsure' (2.3.750), but the prismatic vision it presents offers a safe environment in which to explore intercultural and inter-faith perspectives. But until more professional theatre producers are prepared to peep behind the veil, the play will remain, like a popular English advertisement for Turkish Delight, merely 'full of Eastern promise. (Aita, 2012, p. 49)

Or, as Susanne Wofford puts it, discussing the same adaptation:

Al-Bassam's play thus opens up a dual space marking the border between modern secular theatre and Islamic values and practices, present tense performance and re-enactment of the past, as a way of re-thinking what Illyria as a border between Christian and Ottoman might mean today. (2016, pp. 163-64)

The second major difference between *The Arab Shakespeare Trilogy* and many other contemporary Shakespearean adaptations is, to me, an ethical one linked to Benjamin's *intentio*. The intention of the standard directorial adaptations seeks to draw out the play's timeless resonance, celebrating its ability to speak across generations and cultures in a universalist, timeless manner. This approach re-affirms Ben Johnson's comment in his poetic

preface to the First Folio that '[Shakespeare] was not of an age but for all time'. Modern directors and theatre critics tend to take their orientation not however from Renaissance universality but from the theory of history applied to Shakespeare's plays in the 1960s by Polish critic Jan Kott in his hugely influential book *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*.

In a collection of commentaries published in *The Guardian* in 2008, discussing the RSC's cycle of Shakespeare's history plays, Michael Billington makes his indebtedness explicit:

Shakespeare's histories... pose permanently vital questions about government and politics... they offer timeless examinations of the structures of power. They also make us reflect on the nature of history itself. E.M.W. Tillyard advanced the idea that they propagated the Tudor Myth: that everything led to the divinely ordained accession of Henry VII, and ultimately the beneficent reign of Elizabeth I. Jan Kott countered that they showed history as a 'Grand Mechanism driven by large impersonal forces'. (Billington, 2008, n.p.)

A gathering of academics, actors and directors follow this up in *The Guardian* feature with similar allusions to twentieth-century history as a universalist 'Grand Mechanism' of power. Historian Simon Shama talks about 'the naked machinery of power in all its grinding metallic cruelty'. Shakespearean James Shapiro suggests that 'there is no better way to know which way the cultural and political winds are blowing' than to see a production of *Henry V*. Director Dominic Dromgoole endorses Kott's contemporary universalism: 'the spinning world of England's first major civil war, as portrayed by Shakespeare, is in no great way dissimilar from modern hells such as Afghanistan, Iraq, Chechnya or Bosnia, as thugs with a turn of phrase, and gangsters with well-tailored ideologies, merrily commit populations to despair and murder in the hope of power' (Billington, 2008, n.p.).

Jan Kott's influence on the RSC's versions of Shakespeare's histories began to be consolidated as early as 1963, when Peter Hall read *Shakespeare Our Contemporary* on the train, travelling to Stratford to start rehearsing *The Wars of the Roses* with John Barton:

As I travelled to Stratford for the first rehearsal of *The Wars of the Roses*, I read a proof copy of Jan Kott's book *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*. His analysis of the staircase of power in the histories was a great support for our productions. His political thinking, which is essentially continental... expressed something current in Shakespearean production. (Barton and Hall, 1970, p. xi)

It was clearly at that moment that Hall seized upon Kott's theory of the 'Grand Mechanism' of history in Shakespeare: as history continually revolves, each claimant to the throne rises, only to be subsequently deposed and crushed in an on-going cycle. In the programme notes for *Henry VI*, Barton and Hall included a quotation from Kott, which they felt was especially relevant to their production:

There are two fundamental types of historical tragedy. The first is based on the conviction that history has a meaning, fulfils its objective tasks, and leads in a definite direction. [...] There is another kind of historical tragedy, originating in the conviction that history has no meaning but stands still, or constantly repeats its cruel cycle; that it is an elemental force, like hail, storm, hurricane, birth and death. (Kott, 1967, p. 30)

Hall had been taught at Cambridge by Leavis, and was therefore trained to apprehend Shakespeare as historically rooted in the early modern period, but also the supreme interpreter of a universal human nature: 'not for an age, but for all time'. Kott was one of the new voices revealing that Shakespeare could in fact also be for an age, for other ages, and specifically the present. Shakespeare could be relevant, political, realistic, urgent and contemporary. David Warner's RSC *Hamlet* (1965), with his bedhead hair and long student scarf, replaced Laurence Olivier's middle-aged toff with an 'epitome of 1960s youth'. 'I was convinced', wrote Hall of the first tetralogy, 'that a presentation of one of the bloodiest and most hypocritical periods in history would teach many lessons about the present' (p. xi). Suddenly Shakespeare could be young, 'with-it', modern: our contemporary.

There is however another assertion in that same sentence of Peter Hall's that complicates this paradigm: 'I realised that the mechanism of power had not changed for centuries' (p. xi). So, new contemporaneity was in fact nothing more than old universality writ large. Shakespeare is our contemporary because nothing much has changed since the times he wrote about, let alone the time he wrote in. Despotism, oppression, corruption, exploitation, cruelty and barbarism are as much features of twentieth-century Europe as they were of Plantagenet or Renaissance England. Past and present are indistinguishable. Shakespeare our contemporary: not for an age, but for all time. Kott argued that twentieth-century history re-equipped us for the political violence of Shakespeare. In Gloucester's seduction of Lady Anne he invites the reader to discern 'the night of Nazi occupation, concentration camps, mass-murders ... the cruel time when all moral standards are broken' (Kott, 1967, p. 37). Is this analogy, or continuity? Kott presents it partly in political terms: 'a cruel social order in which the vassals and superiors are in conflict with one another, the

kingdom is ruled like a farm, and falls prey to the strongest'. But also as something like the human condition, an unalterable given unaffected by political action: 'the implacable roller of history crushes everybody and everything' (Kott, 1967, p. 39).

Here Marxist determinism is given a negative trajectory. Where Marx saw humanity making its own history, within determinate conditions, Kott sees humanity as overwhelmed by a crushing unstoppable force. This language seemed to point away from democratic Marxist socialism, and towards nihilism and the absurd. This tendency is best exemplified by Peter Brook's 1962 *King Lear*, explicitly based on Kott's essay 'King Lear, or Endgame' which was included in *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*.

This common legacy colours the most common directorial approaches to Shakespeare, especially to historical and political plays, and explains how adherence to Kott's negative universalism is continually endorsed by critics who share the same ideology. In his review of the Nicholas Hytner production of *Henry V* for *The Guardian*, Michael Billington speaks of the play's 'perennial fascination' (2003, n.p.). The intention of the standard adaptive approach is to display how themes and stories written by the Bard four centuries ago can, through intelligent transposition, continue to resonate for audiences today.

Again and again, in the approaches favoured by directors and lauded by critics, we find these implicit assumptions about the cyclical nature of history and, moreover, the centrality of English history. In comments reflecting on the production, made in 2016, Hytner recalls, 'History was alive... Agincourt was alive'.¹³ The directorial promise of his *Henry V* is to present a critique of the powers invading a foreign country through an exploration of anxiety around invasion. However, by failing to re-imagine the text, this method functions in a contradictory manner by re-affirming the centrality of English as language and the English as nation. As a result, the standard adaptive approach is caught in a bind, where it unwittingly affirms the ongoing primacy of the English tradition as the central cipher. *Richard III: an Arab Tragedy* was paired at Stratford as the alternative to a mainstream RSC production, Michael Boyd's version of *Richard III*, which played at the Courtyard Theatre (formerly the Other Place), while my play occupied the Swan. *Richard III*, according to Boyd, 'does speak to a very immediate contemporary crisis ... a crisis of faith, a crisis of moral authority, a crisis of values' (2007, n.p.). The 'contemporary' setting of the production testified again to the legacy of Jan Kott, but in practice had little to say about either the present or the past. Margaret Litvin observed that this production 'lacked a coherent political frame': 'why the

¹³ These comments can be viewed through the BBC's coverage of the 2017 Hay Festival. See "Nicholas Hytner: How Iraq shaped audience reaction to Henry V" at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p0545fxl>

black shirts? What exactly did Richmond's *kaffiyeh* and Kalshnikov mean to tell us?' (2007, p. 85).

The position of *Richard III: An Arab Tragedy* vis-à-vis this conventional production was that of exotic oriental other to mainstream contemporaneity. As Leah S. Marcus explains, during the twentieth-century Shakespeare was 'brought to the service of Empire'. (2017, p. 4). Marcus's incisive work *How Shakespeare Became Colonial* demonstrates the link between contemporary practices of scholarly editing of Shakespearean works, and England's early twentieth-century Imperial efforts. As scholarly editing practices were invented to create more accurate and rigorous copies of Shakespeare's plays, these same texts were being put to work in the colonies. Walter A. Raleigh, the twentieth-century literary critic (not the Elizabethan statesman) opened his annual lecture to the British Academy in 1918 by professing the particularity of Shakespeare's work:

I think there is no national poet, of any great nation whatsoever, who is so completely representative of his own people as Shakespeare is representative of the English. There is certainly no other English poet who comes near to Shakespeare in embodying our character and our foibles... Shakespeare knew nothing of the British Empire. He was an islander, and his patriotism was centred on

This precious stone set in the silver sea,
Which serves it in the office of a wall,
Or as a moat defensive to a house,

Against the envy of less happier lands. (cited in Marcus, 2017, p. 1)

Shakespeare and Englishness become synonymous. Shakespeare is England and England is Shakespeare. Raleigh displays both the playwright and the nation as fundamentally uninterested in Empire. Yet the quote that he lifts from John of Gaunt precisely advocates for England as the 'defensive house' that functions as the basis for England's colonial efforts. Shakespeare was a method of imposing imperial identity and control for both the colonizers, but also the colonised.

Addressing the role of Shakespeare in New Zealand, Michael Neil has argued that Shakespeare's plays were 'not merely a prestigious written text' but also 'essential equipment, part of an educated man's apparatus for understanding the world, and important talisman of the superior English culture of which he was the emissary' (cited in Levenson and Ormsby, 2017, p. 155). Shakespeare was not only the authority which the colonizer used to assert his own superiority but, when it came to educating the Māori, Shakespeare's plays

were an ‘instrument of imperial authority as important and powerful in its way as the bible and the gun’ (Levenson and Ormsby, 2017, p. 155) Shakespeare was used as a colonial tool for educating and managing colonial subjects.

As a concept, Global Shakespeare is not free from England’s cultural imperialism. While I use the term ‘cultural imperialism’, Neil’s work demonstrates this aspect of imperial endeavour was not in any way disconnected from England’s violence in its colonies but, rather, central to it. When previously colonized people are brought to England to perform Shakespearian adaptations, this allows audiences to be given a parade of cultural oddities, all dutifully paying homage to the cultural monument of Shakespeare. Audiences watch the cultural other mimicking the great Bard, yet these subjects are always prevented from achieving the heights of the ‘universal’; a position that belongs to Shakespeare alone. We need only to glance in the direction of Edward Said’s famous work *Orientalism* to begin to understand the problematic mode of this practice. Said explains: ‘[o]riental is irrational, depraved (fallen), childlike, ‘different’; thus the European is rational, virtuous, mature, normal’ (1978, p. 40). Global Shakespeare enables precisely the display of this problem in that the ‘other culture’ is measured against the culture of the master, always appearing inferior and less developed than the original Shakespearean work. The Global Shakespeare parade allows the reassertion of the global validity of Shakespeare and his universal insight into human affairs.

Global Shakespeare can function to confirm the pedagogical conceit of the colonizer: that the Colonial subject is perpetually in need of moral and aesthetic education, an education that can be gained through the performance of Shakespearian texts. The colonized can be instructed and elevated through an appreciation and imitation of the quintessential English dramatist. In ‘On National Culture’, Franz Fanon describes the phenomena of the colonized mimicry of his master’s culture as the first stage of national literary production: ‘The native intellectual gives proof that he has assimilated the culture of the occupying power... His inspiration is European and we can easily link up these works with definite trends in the literature of the mother country’ (Fanon, 1968, pp. 178-9). For Fanon, the first step towards a national culture is imitation of the master. This step has the curious function of reaffirming the superiority of the colonizer, who provides the origin of the artistic project of the colonized. Yet it opens a new possibility for the so called ‘native intellectual’ to develop a new kind of writing in the second and third stages.

However, it is disturbing that what Fanon considered the first step in the early 1960s remains a dominant mode of artistic production for non-English playwrights engaging British

audiences well into the 2000s. The façade of Global Shakespeare promises audiences an authentic experience of other cultures, yet what is often produced is the reaffirmation of the images of both the colonized and the colonizer, reproduced in communal affirmation of Shakespeare as a monument of English culture. In Said's critique of European representations of the orient, he describes orientalism as a system of citation, in which the Western author readily engages with his representations of the oriental subject. The European is simply gazing at himself, reaffirming a long history of the European's own representation of the other. Said writes:

The Orient then seems to be, not an unlimited extension beyond the familiar European world, but rather a closed field, a theatrical stage affixed to Europe. An Orientalist is but the particular specialist in knowledge for which Europe at large is responsible, in the way that an audience is historically and culturally responsible for (and responsive to) dramas technically put together by the dramatist. In the depths of this Oriental stage stands a prodigious cultural repertoire whose individual items evoke a fabulously rich world: the Sphinx, Cleopatra, Eden, Troy, Sodom and Gomorrah, Astarte, Isis and Osiris, Sheba, Babylon, the Genii, the Magi, Nineveh, Prester John, Mahomet, and dozens more; settings, in some cases names only, half-imagined, half-known; monsters, devils, heroes; terrors, pleasures, desires. The European imagination was nourished extensively from this repertoire: between the Middle Ages and the eighteenth century such major authors as Ariosto, Milton, Marlowe, Tasso, Shakespeare, Cervantes, and the authors of the *Chanson de Roland* and the *Poema del Cid* drew on the Orient's riches for their productions, in ways that sharpened the outlines of imagery, ideas, and figures populating it. In addition, a great deal of what was considered learned Orientalist scholarship in Europe pressed ideological myths into service, even as knowledge seemed genuinely to be advancing.' (Said, 1978, p. 63)

Said describes the narcissism of European authors, more desirous of their own image than any real engagement with anyone else. This is a type of auto-eroticism dressed up as a rigorous and scientific engagement with another culture. The European scholar of orientalism provides a narrative of excavating new knowledge and observing the other, yet what he is really doing is reproducing the same images of his forbears that not only justify past colonial practice but also act as a spur towards new acts of imperialism. The other is kept within the edifice of the European imagination playing out the narrative of Western culture.

All of this notwithstanding, Said describes orientalism as a stage, which acted as my own spur. Aware of the impulses of Global Shakespeare, I desired to use the audience's desire for self-identification to move them into unsettled waters of engagement through performance. I used the stage set by these problematic forms to ask new questions both of English / Western and Arab audiences. It was the chaotic and critical aspects of Shakespeare, which are so often erased by the narrative of Shakespeare as English edifice, that I was able to identify with. If the cultural industry of Shakespeare functions to silence the more volatile and problematic aspects of his works, these were exactly the areas I wanted my own work to explore. The problems with Global Shakespeare were precisely the reason that I had to engage with this subject, invoking and turning inside out the desire of the institution and, at times, the audiences. The work also sought to develop the postcolonial critiques which, in so far as they draw the clear lines of imperialist practice, also have a tendency to render static and formulaic the shifting and complex social relations of both the past and the present, thereby reducing the contemporary possibilities for engagement between European and Arab audiences.

The plays in *The Arab Shakespeare Trilogy* adapt Shakespeare with intent to question this notional validity of Shakespearian timelessness and the universality and centrality of the English tradition. The plays achieve this through a heightened and explicit awareness of their position as transcultural objects and variably translatable texts that actively engage and transform their origins in order to stage the possibility of their own future transformations. As Khalid Amine puts it:

These dramatized works (adaptations) establish new relations between English, Arabic and other world languages ... indeed the significance of the dramatic work lies in the relational interaction of different languages. (2016, p. 86)

Here, Amine is endorsing Graham Holderness's earlier argument:

Al-Bassam's hybrid productions offer an implicit critique of the imported culture by forcing Shakespeare into the present, and disrupt the receiving culture by showing Arab society its own reflection refracted through the Shakespearean glass. Here then translation is a form of cultural negotiation, and the works themselves a fertile and disturbing form of intercultural communication. (2008, p. 74)

The overriding question, therefore, was never whether the original texts needed to be adapted, but rather *how* to make the Shakespearean text carry a distinct agenda and another

authorial voice without marring the first and diluting the second. How would one render *Hamlet* a story about the birth of Islamic religious fanaticism fuelled by domestic corruption and Western opportunism? How could *Richard III* become a cautionary tale about a crisis of succession in a petro-dollar monarchy? Was it possible to turn *Twelfth Night* into a story of secularism and tolerance in the Arab world being devoured by religious censorship and state authoritarianism? More generally, how does one face the challenge of making these concerns legible and engaging to international audiences unfamiliar with contextual detail of the Arab world, whilst simultaneously maintaining the relevance and provocation I wanted to deliver to Arab audiences? In both *The Al-Hamlet Summit* and *The Speaker's Progress*, I developed new texts and guided the storytelling through a new channel. With *Richard III*, I took a different approach, one that was more adaptive than transformative, reliant more on transposition than composition, a process I explore later in this thesis.

As I worked to adapt, re-write and compose each of these plays, I was lucky to have active dialogues with leading scholars working in the field of Arab Shakespeare, notably Professor Graham Holderness and Professor Margaret Litvin. The dialogues between us nourished, at various moments, both their work and my own. For instance, in an essay published in 2007, Graham Holderness traced the development of the *Trilogy* materials from earlier works, showing at the same time how in the course of that process, the immediate critical response to the plays became limiting and restrictive. He discusses initially *The Arab League Hamlet*, produced first in Tunisia in 2001, an adapted version of the Shakespeare text, with scenes cut and re-arranged, and the cast reduced down to a few principal players. This work introduced the 'summit' setting that 'highlighted explicit political parallels between the world of Shakespeare's court and the modern Arab world, and invited response as to a piece of political theatre' (Holderness, 2007, p. 129).

When performed in London, the play was treated as little more than a 'clever' adaptation of Shakespeare, as indicated in a review by Peter Culshaw:

The *Hamlet* I saw in London began with the characters seated behind desks as though at a summit, complete with name tags and headphones. This set the scene for an evening of power struggle, negotiations, compromise and tragic chaos. The overheated, incestuous atmosphere built up ('something rotten in the state of Denmark') with Claudius as a western puppet and the confused Hamlet outraged by the corruption. (2004, n.p.)

I had wanted to put the English-speaking spectator inside the head of the Arab spectator in Kuwait and Tunisia. I had wanted the English spectator to experience the same sense of

strangeness in familiarity the Arab one had felt and, above all, the same degree of implication in the events presented to them on stage. But, instead, *The Arab League Hamlet* took the spectator back into Shakespeare.

Again, when *The Al-Hamlet Summit* was first performed, it played naturally into that same expectation of political theatre. Peter Culshaw wrote that it ‘makes explicit what was implicit’ (2004, n.p.) in the *Arab League Hamlet*. As Holderness comments:

This emphasis on specific contemporary political issues offers the play to audiences as a piece of dramatic journalism, or a *roman-a-clef* from which obvious contemporary analogues to the Shakespearean characters can readily be identified. (Holderness, 2007, n.p.)

This is exactly how the play was read by many spectators, as in these examples:

Polonius is a devious spin-doctor, Hamlet moves from indecision to becoming a Bin Laden-type religious fanatic, while Ophelia ends up as a suicide bomber. CNN-type footage of burning oil wells adds to the claustrophobia. (Gardner, 2004, n.p.)

and,

Hamlet becomes a religious extremist ... Laertes joins the army ... Ophelia is a suicide bomber ... (Costa, 2002, n.p.)

Holderness makes it clear that *The Al-Hamlet Summit* was intended to do something different and more complex:

It is abundantly clear that Al-Bassam was trying to do something more than this. These quotations suggest that Western spectators of *The Al-Hamlet Summit* are impressed primarily with the way in which the play brings Shakespeare up to date, providing dramatic analogues for contemporary archetypes or stereotypes (the Arab dictator, the Islamic fundamentalist, the suicide bomber) that are visible daily on every TV screen. But Al-Bassam wanted to move the spectator away from these temptingly easy analogies. The most substantial difference between *The Arab League Hamlet* and *The Al-Hamlet Summit* is that in the latter Al-Bassam deviated from the Shakespearean text and produced a wholly new script combining a much wider range of linguistic and theatrical registers. These naturally include echoes of Shakespearean verse and the modern colloquial language of a contemporary-oriented political theatre, but also new layers of poetic language derived from classical Arabic, including the Holy Quran, from contemporary

Arabic poetry, and from a ‘cross-cultural’ poetic sensibility capable of interweaving all these strands and producing from them a new theatrical discourse. (Holderness, 2007, p. 131)

This intention is more fully realised, Holderness, argues, in *Richard III: An Arab Tragedy*, which ‘goes well beyond the interpolation of agit-prop relevance, and has the capacity to take the spectator deeper not only into Arab culture, but into territories of myth and communal emotion where trans-cultural rapprochements can more effectively take place’ (Holderness 2007, p. 134).

Margaret Litvin, who has also written extensively on the plays of the *Trilogy*, has devised a model for considering Shakespeare outside of England and English history she calls the ‘global kaleidoscope’. This model recognizes the scattered nature of Shakespeare’s global reception, where, far from a sacred, intact text, she argues:

... *Hamlet* did not arrive in the Arab world only or mainly through Britain’s colonization of Egypt. Nor was Shakespeare’s work first packaged as a single colonially imposed authoritative set of texts... Arab audiences came to know Shakespeare through a kaleidoscopic array of performances, texts, and criticism from many directions: not just the ‘original’ British source culture but also French, Italian, American, Soviet, and Eastern European literary and dramatic traditions, which at times were more influential than Britain’s.

(Litvin, 2011, p. 2)

This approach places Shakespeare into a system of variously independent cultural and linguistic structures that intersect in ways that challenge the traditional, imperialistic approach to reading ‘Global Shakespeare’. Shakespeare, instead, becomes a living idea that continues to transform with each significant production of his work. ‘Each generation’s reception and reinterpretation then becomes part of the kaleidoscope for the generation that follows’ (Litvin, 2011, p. 7). In a book on Shakespeare’s *Richard III*, Rebecca Lemon argues along similar lines:

Richard III: an Arab Tragedy deploys Shakespeare in two directions: to address issues within the Arab world, for Arab audiences; and to raise issues of Western intervention with audiences in the West ... Al-Bassam translates Shakespeare in several ways in order to adapt the play for multiple modern audiences ... Al-Bassam wanted to challenge audiences to move beyond their positionality to see themselves through the eyes of another. (Lemon, 2018, pp. 145-6)

Lemon is concerned primarily with Shakespeare, and with the *Trilogy* as an instance of global adaptation. Other critics have mobilized the *Trilogy* in arguments about politics and culture. In a recent and interesting critical intervention, Adam Hansen demonstrates the potentiality of the *Trilogy* to challenge and subvert prevailing political discourse. Hansen's focus is not directly on the plays but on the operation of counter-terrorism strategy in the United Kingdom, in particular the *Prevent* strategy. While it is natural, Hansen argues, to think of Shakespeare as representative of 'fundamental British values', his work is actually one of those 'ungoverned spaces' the *Prevent* strategy seeks to police and control. Ironically, Hansen depicts Shakespeare as a 'mouthpiece for extremist views', whose work should be banned in the interests of national security. This chain of reasoning leads Hansen to the totalitarian world of *The Speaker's Progress*, where Shakespeare is effectively banned.

The plays of the *Arab Shakespeare Trilogy* are then adduced as useful initiatives in combating such repressive policies. They show, according to Hansen, the roots of extremism, 'the desperation and impotence that makes someone extreme'; they 'explicate the complexity and heterogeneity of Muslim identities, reminding his audiences that Islam is not homogeneous ... but is as fragmented and diverse as post-Reformation Christianity', which in turn 'humanizes and personalizes religious experience'; and they demonstrate how 'contemporary Middle Eastern or Islamic identities are fashioned in opposition to yet through influence by Western power, even as this power draws on Muslim histories and voices'. In Hansen's view the writer possesses an enviable power to create an enduring spirit of resistance:

What gives the pen the power to persist, and resist? Al Bassam repeatedly signals the liberty and nuance afforded him by the diversity of indigenous Arabic expression and register ... Drama can bring different voices together, in conflict or in concord. Yet he also insists Shakespeare's voice (or voices) also provide space for critique to exist, especially in hybrid creations shielded by bearing some connection to his work.¹⁴

In what follows, I will explore some significant aspects of the plurality of influences, inspirations and interpretations that went into the making of *The Arab Shakespeare Trilogy* and consider its own place and significance within Litvin's kaleidoscopic continuum.

¹⁴ I am grateful to Professor Graham Holderness, Editor of *Critical Survey*, for giving me access to this unpublished article by Hansen.

Translation and *The Al-Hamlet Summit*

Arms Dealer We call them terrorists.

Polonius I like this word. Will you write it for me? (*Offering him a pen.*)

Arms Dealer Of course. (*Writing.*)

Polonius Terro-ri!

Arms Dealer Terro-ris.

Polonius Terror-roo!

Arms Dealer Terror-ris.

Polonius Terror-um!

Arms Dealer Terrorist!

Polonius Terrorist! Excellent word, much money in this word.

(*The Al-Hamlet Summit, Act III, Scene 1*)

It was as an outsider to the intricacies of theatre production in the Arab world that I accepted the invitation of a Japanese arts organisation to remake *The Al Hamlet Summit* in Arabic. A representative of the Tokyo International Arts Festival had seen the piece, in its English form, at the Cairo International Festival of Experimental Theatre (CIFET) in 2002. Two years later, as the Japanese Army entered the southern Iraqi city of Samawa in the highly controversial first deployment of troops beyond Japanese soil since the Second World War, we premiered the work in Tokyo under festival slogans that read: ‘Social revitalization of theatre’, ‘Reconciliation of cultural globalism and multiculturalism’, and ‘Understanding Islamic culture’.¹⁵

The Al-Hamlet Summit and *The Speaker’s Progress* were written originally in English for performance in Arabic. I was schooled in Arabic until the age of 11 and, as a result, read and speak fluently but have never felt comfortable writing creatively in the language. Thus, I needed to find an effective way of translating the texts into Arabic. The translations I undertook became a significant influence in the on-going evolution of the plays. What began as an apparently simple task led me into a labyrinth of linguistic possibilities that directly affected the political connotations of the plays.

¹⁵ See N Tanaka, N 2004, ‘International Theatre Festival Takes Japan to a New Stage’, *Japan Times*, 24 February, accessible at <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/text/ft20040225a1.html>.

Translating drama from one language to another is, in any circumstance, a delicate task. Diplomats speaking at the UN perform in formatted, clear, tidy, transparent language in order to avoid any unwanted misunderstandings with other delegates. Metaphor, simile, assonance, dissonance, rhythm, word play and other tools of rhetoric and poetry are all unwelcome guests in international forums. But in drama, thankfully, it's the opposite. Words are valued for their opacity, their violence, and their capacity to mesmerize, captivate, shock, and be ambiguous. Balancing the need for stable rendition of meaning and what Benjamin calls 'the unfathomable, the mysterious, the "poetic,"' became key in the undertaking of the translation of *The Al-Hamlet Summit* from the English in which I had scripted it, into the Arabic in which the play would be performed. Further, the dramatic and political complications of translation would become central to the artistic mode, the *intentio*, of the play itself (Benjamin, 1969, p. 70).

In the setting of *The Al-Hamlet Summit*, we witness a dramatization of translation's split imperative between a close and precise rendition of the original, on the one hand, and the disruption and alteration of the original, on the other. A majority of the play's interactions take place in a political assembly hall, where characters vote the narrative forward. In this way, intimate and passionate exchanges between familiar characters and circumstances are altered, heightened and distorted when translated / transposed into the highly volatile setting of the political summit. In Act II, Scene 3, an air of formal pragmatism governs Polonius's reading of Hamlet's obscure poetry. 'Note the apocalyptic imagery', says Polonius. 'Note the yearning for violent and comprehensive change to the world order. I have studies that will elucidate further on the links between this sort of fantasy and terrorist activities.' With love poetry as evidence of Hamlet's mental instability and threat to the State, Polonius, Gertrude, and Claudius finally decide that it is best to delay his marriage to Ophelia. Polonius then frames a domestic, familial decision as a motion before the assembly: 'The Royal Marriage to be delayed, pending further proof of the Prince's seditious leanings.' They vote, and the motion is carried. Here, we witness one of many instances where ostensibly Shakespearean scenes are translated into the language and setting of the Summit and, through this process of translation / transposition, have their signification altered.

This persistent preoccupation with appearances, especially *public* appearances, is another thread throughout the *Trilogy*. The desire and need to allow only what is sanctioned to be visible in a globalised world culminates in the elaborate and sanitary 'state' reconstruction of 'culture for export' in *The Speaker's Progress*. Translation is always the fulcrum at the centre of this project. The exchange between Polonius and the American Arms

Dealer in Act III, Scene 1 of *The Al-Hamlet Summit* makes explicit the stakes and politics of linguistic and cultural translation. The Arms Dealer's teaching of the English word 'terrorist' to an eager and giddy Polonius (who is an Arabic monolingualist) becomes a dark mirror for the influence of foreign interests and internal corruption in the Arab world, a mirror made darker when Ophelia becomes a suicide-bomber in a disturbing manifestation of Polonius's paternal paranoia and fear of Western stigmatization that plays out in an act of ultimate self-harm.¹⁶

Ophelia's final monologue, spoken from the projection of a pre-recorded video, mixes registers of broken English and Arabic as source signifier while she voices the need to 'express with [her] body what is not / able for to express politics and mighty nations' (Act IV, Scene 5). Ophelia's monologue frames her violent actions as a desperate attempt toward self-expression that literally explodes her female frame and becomes the culmination of the sustained sexual violence she suffers throughout the play. Violence, she hopes, will be a universal language. 'I have tried to speak the language of women', she says. 'I have tried to forgive, on many night I severed my tongue / but my silence bleeds from my mouth.' This linguistic amalgamation that both witnesses the abuse she has suffered and also pronounces her perverted sense of agency references another interaction with the Arms Dealer in Act III, Scene 3. When Ophelia tells him that she wants a bomb, he pretends to misunderstand her English and proceeds to pin her to the ground:

Ophelia I want a bomb. Qumbila!

Arms Dealer Qubla? A kiss?

Ophelia Qumbila – a bomb.

Arms Dealer A kiss! Say it again!

Ophelia Qumbila!

Arms Dealer Qumbila!

Ophelia A bomb.

Arms Dealer Kiss!

Ophelia Bomb!

Arms Dealer Bomb!

Ophelia Kiss!

Arms Dealer A little one or a big one?

Ophelia Any.

¹⁶ Upon finding Ophelia wearing a headscarf in Act II, Scene 1, Polonius scolds her for looking like an 'Irhabiyya,' or 'terrorist.'

As the Arms Dealer restrains Ophelia, threatening sexual violation and taunting her with aggressive signifiers, it becomes disturbingly clear that the problem of translation in the play is also a problem of politics, violence, and desire.

Translation can also be a tool for rendering overall new forms of expression and ideas, something I realized during the writing and translating of *The Al-Hamlet Summit*. When a play is written from beginning to end in one language and then translated into another, a balance of tone and meaning becomes achievable in the translated play. But when the play continues to be written *through* the process of translation, the writing process enters into a kind of Ping-Pong dynamic where one language ignites an idea in the other. New meanings and possibilities are created, and new voices are heard through the migration into another language. Benjamin writes, ‘Of all literary forms, [translation] is the one charged with the special mission of watching over the maturing process of the original language and the birth pangs of its own’ (Benjamin, 1969, pp. 73). It is these labours and ‘birth pangs’ of translation that characterised the process of transference of meaning between English and Arabic in *The Al-Hamlet Summit*.

When I first started translating the pieces, I sought the help of venerable, certified translators. Every page that came back to me rang hollow. ‘It’s important’, I’d object, ‘that the Arabic carries a stylistic vigour, a modernity, a studied variety of tonal register’. ‘But’, the baffled, translator would reply, ‘it’s as accurate as it can be in Standard Arabic!’ Standard Modern Arabic (S.M.A.) is the U.N. ‘global medium’, a literary form used across the Arab world in writing and formal speech. It is also the chosen medium of most twentieth-century Arab dramatists. Established and promoted in the early twentieth century, S.M.A. erases the idiomatic and vernacular aspects of spoken Arabic and successfully ensures clarity across wide geographical areas by proposing a whitewashed, comprehensible, and standardized alternative. Partly as a result of this standard speech, today’s Arabic is a diglossic language. Different forms and varieties of the same language are used depending on the social context—a supremely Shakespearean linguistic model. The Arabic dialogue in these scripts, however, needed to step beyond the Esperantan straightjacket of linguistic uniformity and leap into the churning waters of the diglossic language.

This decision liberated the dramatic text on many levels. Suddenly, there were overwhelming possibilities. Extracts of dialogue, scraps of monologue, out-dated translations of Shakespeare glossed with pen and covered in rewrites would end up in diverse hands. I’d call on friends, associates, poets, religious authorities, and lawyers to propose ways of saying political slogans, jokes, dictums, sayings, pre-Islamic poetry, Quranic verses, words that

stopped being said by women two generations ago, slang. All were bona fide conveyors of meaning. Later, at the rehearsal stage, actors would apply their performance instinct to layer, adding detail, feeling, and resonance to the texts. In this way, the Arabic texts became living palimpsests that accrued the input, graffiti, and inflection of many scribes.

The resultant Arabic meanings would often migrate back into the original English version of the text, and I would re-engage with the Ping-Pong process of translation, feeding back into the English version the freshly altered Arabic script. The project became for me a stylistic and literary engagement in what Mikhail Bakhtin's identifies as a 'hybrid utterance', a type of inter-linguistic heteroglossia, in which the diversity of voice moves both across levels of social and economic stratification and also across the boundaries of translation between the languages themselves (Bakhtin, 1992, pp. 272). Only over time and through the act of repeated performance would the shifting, morphing palimpsest settle and crystallize into a definitive, stable text in both languages.

Theatre, Politics, and *Richard III*, *An Arab Tragedy*

Judge Where do you live?

Saddam Hussein I live in every Iraqi's house.¹⁷

At the intersection of global politics and cultural policy, where many of the opportunities to make my international work emerged, little is random. At the time, however, I felt like Oedipus at Davlia, the unwitting protagonist at a junction of convergent paths. These paths gave me the opportunity to form a company of actors, artists, and technicians from a variety of Arab and non-Arab nationalities, thereby overcoming the first obstacle that stands in the way of contemporary Arab theatre practice: namely, nationalism.

Cultural policy makers in the Arab world are deeply suspicious of anything that allows artists to create work beyond the yoke of the state. The artist is best contained within the stocks and gallows of state funding and state censorship. Any practice that loosens the leash of the state around artists' necks is fiercely resisted by the mechanism of state art production. Pan Arab (dare I conjure its demons?) transnational, non-governmental artistic collaborations are suspect and undesirable by definition. The absurd pinnacle of the artistic straightjacket of state nationalism is a type of inter-Arab state festival in which Ministers of

¹⁷ The trial of Saddam Hussein.

Culture (or Information!) from around the Arab world respond to invitations from their counterparts to send representative envoys of theatrical art to compete in festivals that distribute hotel rooms, meal vouchers, and prizes on the basis of nation-state identity. Troupes performing at Les Journées Théâtrales de Cartage, Cairo's CIFET, the Damascus, Amman, Kuwait, and Sharjah Festivals are invited not on the basis of their artistic merit but rather as representatives of their country. The yoke of the state is omni-present.¹⁸

Separately, on a purely practical artistic level, in order to find the actors with sufficient range, expressive ability, and experience to create the work I envisioned, I needed to look beyond the boundaries of one state. The three plays that make up the *Trilogy* explore in their own ways a thematically connected body of issues: power, corruption, radical ideologies, and the forces that move societies towards fracture, dissolution or—as is the case in *The Speaker's Progress*—major change. The plays deal with issues that are systemic to more than one Arab society. As a result, they consciously seek to position themselves outside the contingencies of localized, national politics and within a more universal framework of regional concerns.¹⁹

Given this content, it is difficult to imagine any Arab state willing to produce and disseminate this work. Indeed, as the *Trilogy* developed and performed internationally, and as new co-producers were sought to fund the creation of new works in the cycle, it proved impossible to find support from any Arab state funding mechanism. The global, international interface of theatre production was, therefore, instrumental in unhooking and liberating my work from the stifling contingencies of parochial, state-based artistic practice. However, the international framework of production also brings with it its own limitations, its own curse.

The agenda instigated by international co-production is to create a work for an international audience, a dramatic work fit for 'export', fit for global consumption, anytime, anywhere, whereas the aim of *The Arab Shakespeare Trilogy* has always been to catalyse a process of change within the Arab world. The two objectives are, it would seem, divergent. More critically, in presenting our work on the international stage, there was always the danger of falling into the trap of Orientalism. Within a globalized media landscape that

¹⁸ The Kuwaiti state refused to recognise *The Al-Hamlet Summit* as a sufficiently worthy state export. Thus, it was performed at CIFET in 2002 as a representative of the United Kingdom, where the production company, Zaoum Theatre, was based. The piece was awarded the top accolades of Best Director and Best Performance Awards.

¹⁹ For a reading of cross-cultural implications of this approach, see M Litvin 2011, 'Explosive Signifiers: Sulayman Al-Bassam's Post-9/11 Odyssey', in DA Brooks, M Biberman, and JR Lupton, (eds), *Shakespeare After 9/11: How a Social Trauma Reshapes Interpretation*, pp. 103-36, Edwin Mellen Press, Lewiston, NY.

portrays the Arab world and its peoples in negative stereotypical forms as the pre-modern, sensualist, bloodthirsty, irrational Other (the Calibans), there was a constant risk that the content of the material I was presenting—obsessed as it often is by violence, death, corruption, and irrationality—could be hijacked, misunderstood, and used to reinforce a status quo based on prejudice, ignorance, and hatred. It took me some time (and personal distress) to work out the most effective strategies to address these issues, and, throughout the ten-year period, different solutions were adopted for each project. What these various strategies and devices shared was the intention to establish a double-edged moral critique within the mechanisms of the plays themselves.

As outlined above, the pieces are highly critical of dominant political practices inside the Arab world; simultaneously, however, they construct a second political discourse that is directed towards audiences situated outside the Arab world, looking in. The result of this bilingual critique is that neither Arab audiences nor their Western counterparts can watch these pieces without feeling a sense of being addressees in a dramatic political dialogue that elicits engagement. The works carry a double-edged moral thrust. Audience expectation and audience recognition play important roles in this. I have written elsewhere about the utility of Shakespeare as a decoy to get beyond local taboo structures and censorship.²⁰ Theatre-makers operating under censorship have long adopted the mask of the ‘world classic’ to make pointed critique of their societies without exposing themselves directly to censure and punishment.

A second crucial aspect of working with and from Shakespearean texts is to understand the baggage they bring with them. By ‘baggage’, I refer to what the Shakespearean texts represent on an iconic, cultural, and theatrical level as a result of their accrued performance and critical histories. *Hamlet*, for instance, has become shorthand for existential trauma, while *Richard III*, shorthand for evil. These auxiliary meanings—the baggage—figure strongly in the minds of audiences coming to see these pieces, forming part of the associative awareness the spectators bring to a performance. They act as lures that tempt audiences to the piece in anticipation of the pleasure afforded of recognition. The Shakespearean baggage, therefore, is very much part of the performance before the show begins, and it influences how I am led to adapt, construct, and, ultimately, present the piece.

Arab audiences coming to see Shakespeare in Arabic expect to see a romantic tale set in far away castles with import to them primarily through the veil of allegory. The Shakespearean character names maintained in the texts feed this audience anticipation,

²⁰ See S Al-Bassam 2005, ‘The Bard of Basra’, *The Guardian*, 22 September.

consolidating it in order to more effectively subvert it through an urgency created by language, costumes, style, and content of the piece. When that veil is shredded, however, when the summit seems less and less like a Danish palace, Arab audiences become the addressees of a highly realistic, contemporary political drama.

Western or non-Arab audiences come expecting the opposite. They desire a familiar tale made distant and novel through its ethnographic re-colouring into Arabic. There is an inherent exoticism in the Western audience's expectations of these pieces. In a manner similar to that used with Arab audiences, the plays transform Western audiences into addressees of dramatic political discourse by recognizing and reinforcing their expectations on one level, and challenging and subverting them on another. The plays use the familiar tropes of the Shakespearean tales—the character names, the storyline, etc.—not to tell a Shakespearean story, but rather to challenge the audience's own preconceptions about the 'Arab world' and, furthermore, its issues, their causes, and many tenets of the post-colonial discourse that informs the relationship of the West to the Arab world.

Margaret's opening monologue in *Richard III, an Arab Tragedy* is perhaps the best example of this implicating dramatic force:

Margaret I am Margaret. You needn't be concerned about me; we lost. It is your right to ignore me. I would ignore myself if my history let me. I don't want your loans, your gifts, your reconstruction grants; I don't want your pity—we lost. All I ask from you is not to question my thirst for revenge. It's not because I'm Arab; I read history and see. In all events, my name is not Margaret, but our history is so awful even the victors have changed their names.

Margaret employs her Shakespearean name but immediately qualifies it, defining herself as the marginalised, defeated, exoticised other. She establishes a logic of conquest in which she, Margaret, is posited as the vanquished, and the unsuspecting audience is thrust into the role of the victor. Then, in a reversal of victim psychology, she attacks the condescending assumptions of the victor's gaze and defines its parameters. She confounds the voices of the Shakespearean Margaret (the defeated, punished, outcast Lancastrian ex-Queen) through the position of Arab performer addressing a hegemonic (Western) audience. She also prepares the viewers for the ensuing game of sub-textual meaning that will be played beneath the banner of Shakespearean nameplates and the ethnographic curio that is Shakespeare in Arabic. In this way, through an acute and explicit self-awareness of the stakes involved in presenting intercultural political theatre, the pieces seek to engage with the expectations and

prejudices of non-Arab audiences in order to entangle them in a programmatic subversion of their own prejudices.

There can be no ‘out’ for the Western audience—not even through pity. Theodor W. Adorno says that ‘aesthetic sympathy with the oppressed runs the risk of being too affirmative and of colluding with the oppressor’ (1984, p. 324). In Margaret’s rejection of the spectator’s sympathy, there is a withholding of the cathartic experience familiar to audiences of the Shakespearean tragedy. The audience’s emotional investment in the characters’ demise or the oppression that they have come to represent is given no scope.²¹ Adorno explains:

The purging of the affects in Aristotle’s *Poetics* no longer makes equally frank admission of its devotion to ruling interests, yet it supports them all the same in that his ideal of sublimation entrusts art with the task of providing aesthetic semblance as a substitute satisfaction for the bodily satisfaction of the targeted public’s instincts and needs: Catharsis is a purging action directed against the affects and an ally of repression. (1984, p. 324)

Margaret’s disinterest in the audience or its emotions is representative of the adaptation’s overall intention toward audience expectations in relation to Shakespeare and how Shakespeare is *supposed* to function in an Arab context. In this moment, she wrests the adaptation from its responsibilities to the original text or the present audience and, instead, opens the stage to a new horizons of feeling.

Interlude

The final form that has become Richard III, An Arab Tragedy developed over a period of political insecurity and personal consternation. The following captures a bit of both.

Summer, 2006. Kuwait.

Having been commissioned by the Royal Shakespeare Company, UK, to make a free adaptation of *Richard III*, under the working title of ‘The Baghdad Richard’, I found myself hosting many a circular conversation with myself. One of these conversations led me to write to a friend—an Iraqi director and dramaturge who I’d admired greatly and who had recently

²¹ For a reading of the ending of *Richard III, an Arab Tragedy* in relation to the Shakespearean text, see G Holderness 2007b, ‘From Summit to Tragedy: Sulayman Al-Bassam’s *Richard III* and Political Theatre’, *Critical Survey*, vol. 19, no. 3, pp. 106-25.

passed away.²²

31 July 2006

Dear Awni,

I miss you. I'm in the process of working on the commission of *Richard III* for the Royal Shakespeare Company that we spoke about last time we met. Tyranny—though we've dollops of it—is a thing I'm having difficulty finding a suitable dramatic language for. When I agreed to make this project, Saddam Hussein was still in hiding; his Tikriti hovel was not on the radar; *Operation Red Dawn* was still *Operation Desert Scorpion* or *Planet X* or whatever it was and, back then, it seemed fitting—or at least not completely outrageous—to call it 'The Baghdad Richard'.

The title immediately struck a chord with the RSC—and the sensationalist British media—and now I feel like I'm nailed to a board, having to write a kind of 50's Schlock, Horror B-movie that would inevitably only reconfirm all the hysterical prejudices against us that I want rid of!!

Richard III is above all a history play, and you can't go overlaying one nation's history onto another without deforming one and obliterating the other. The only way *Richard III* can become *The Baghdad Richard* is if you approximate, colonise, and completely truncate the contemporary history of Iraq—I'm not prepared to do it. Or, you treat *Richard III* as a portrait of the pathology of a tyrant—in which case it would be more interesting to look at *Macbeth* because at least *Macbeth* has domestic settings and the translations into Arabic are better! In any case, now that Saddam's going to be hanged and Iraq is creeping towards civil war under the stewardship of its belligerently irresponsible Occupiers, it seems doubly inappropriate to revisit Saddam's rise and fall. To do that now would caste the glow of mythology onto the man and end up excusing the American Occupation in one way or another.

You were acutely aware of the terrible stranglehold placed on cross-cultural work by the prejudice of Arab Nationalism, on the one hand, and Western reductionism, on the other. You knew what it felt like holding a handful of adders.

And the worst thing—a kind of Buddhist hell—our history wants to die, yet is perpetually reborn. Baghdad is already at one remove from Baghdad, and Richard at two

²² Awni Karoumi, Iraqi dramaturge, teacher, director and friend, 1945-2006.

removes from Richard. Baghdad is Riyadh, Damascus, Tehran, Cairo, Tel Aviv and elsewhere. Richard is Saddam, Abdullah, Bashar, Dick Cheney and others. The disease is already metastatic, and the origin needs to be found. But it's not hiding in the story of a provincial thug turned megalomaniac psychopath—his story is anecdotal; the region's history is not.

'Our armies do not come into your cities and lands as conquerors or enemies, but as liberators', also *sprach* Sir Stanley Maude... Standing proud in Baghdad in 1917. Old Stanley might have made a sprightly Etonian-Baghdad Richard, but he died of cholera too fast. Or was it dysentery? Why can't our history promptly die of cholera?

Not far North from here, car bombs are going off, limbs are flying into the air; death and revenge are becoming part of the natural order. In Lebanon, the Israelis are back to bombing the hell out of civilians to create new temples to their Gods of destruction. Perhaps that is a way forward: take from Shakespeare a strand of Gloucester's DNA, the helixes of revenge... a root to cure us with.

I remember you told me about a baker woman—was she in Mosul?—who baked her bread on her doorstep and resolutely continued to bake her bread on her doorstep when snipers and bullets filled the air above her head? That would be worth showing— wouldn't it?

Awni, I miss you terribly and just wanted to let you know.

Yours,

Sulayman

Gloucester Foul wrinkled witch, what makest thou in my sight?

Queen Margaret But repetition of what thou hast marr'd.

(*Richard III* Act I, Scene 3)

Having been summoned to the Ministry of Information in my home country; told how lucky I was to be a citizen of my home country commissioned to present the first ever play in Arabic in the birthplace of the Bard; told that *Richard III* required a lot of horses to be made properly; and warned against upsetting anyone in the home country by imagining that a citizen of the home country could go naming the play after the capital city of the neighbouring country especially given that Richard was, after all, a proper English name, I

went home and wrote the following story—an Arab political allegory:

It was a dusty, death-mouth night in mid July and the only thing that moved inside the perimeter of the palace were the man-eating carp in the artificial lake and the sprinklers over the lawns. It was on this night that the dream, delivered by an angel, came to the Leader.

Troubled by its portent, the Leader cancelled the next morning's meetings and prowled through his gardens distracted. Drinking glass upon glass of fresh almond juice, his Jordanian cook ordered thirty sacks of almonds; National Television aired the same football match ten times in a row as no other instructions were forthcoming and the day was remembered as one in which the children of the city were too fearful to lay traps for birds and muezzins at the top of their minarets struggled with vertigo.

That evening, in a faux Baroque chamber, the members of the Revolutionary Command Council were summoned to discuss the Leader's dream. Of the original twenty-two members of this Council, seven men remained. Fourteen eyes around an oval of Italian marble and the Leader at its head.

The Leader described his dream in detail and, in turn, each member of the Revolutionary Command Council was invited—by a flick of his finger—to comment on it. The dream had left a positive impression on the Leader's mind; the dream had not caused him to wake up sweating, nor afraid, the dream was not to be misunderstood as a side effect of intestinal gases erupting in the sleeping brain; the dream was timely; dreams of this nature were common in the lives of chosen men, prophets and the like; the dream emanated from the greater Arab sub-conscious—it was a token of truth, a revelation. After five hours of intense exegesis, the Council voted unanimously that the dream was to be acted upon as the Leader saw fit. The Leader was displeased; not one of the 'sons of whores'—as he called them—had understood the meaning of the dream. The room grew smaller. A line of warrior ants trickled out from a loose tile on the wall. One of the Councilors fainted and was carried away. The Leader lit a long Cohiba Lancero cigar and an attendant unrolled a map onto the table.

What stood between the Leader's dream and reality was the existence of this: the Leader tapped his finger onto the map. 'This!' exclaimed the Leader, tapping emphatically, was to be taught a lesson. The meeting concluded, the six Council members each received keys to brand new Toyota Coronas, gifts for their relatives, wired with Stasi microphones. The seventh—who had fainted—joined the food chain in the artificial lake.

The Leader, who would not sleep now, called for his barber. As the barber painted his white hairs black, applied warm wax to his cheeks and restored the flush and glow of youth

to his head, the leader picked up his large leader's phone and called April,²³ Plenipotentiary-at-large of the Great Player. 'I have had a dream', he said.

'How delightful', she replied.

She—unlike our Leader, who was a man of the past—was a woman of the future. The certainty of knowledge given to her by this curious birth right meant that during her exchanges with him, she neither appeased him, nor was at any time duped into giving explicit consent to what would later be called his 'tyrannical madness', his 'consummate evil', and 'terrorist designs'. She knew what to say and what to do; April knew what was what.

At noon on the following day, April and the Leader sat in deep leather sofas, facing one another, with uncrossed arms. The interpreter—Sadoun—settled precariously on the edge of a straight-backed chair between them. 'We have no opinion on your Arab-Arab conflicts, it's not our affair', said April, sprightly. The sun was pulling high as a dagger and the phones had stopped ringing. The leader put a long Cohiba Lancero cigar between his lips and Sadoun leapt to light it.

The events of the story unfolded on the 25th of July, 1990. Eight days later, the Leader's dream rolled across the Kuwaiti border and the world, as he knew it, was, once again, altered forever.

However tempting it might have been to throw the book of Western literary evil (Richard III) at Saddam Hussein, this strategy could, at best, produce a freak show. The Americans were already making daytime reality TV out of Saddam's trial. A play conceived along the lines of the freak show could neither expiate the sins of the region nor reduce the likelihood of other tyrants succeeding him.

A significant and enduring part of Shakespeare's undertaking in the War of the Roses cycle was to conjure up the horrors of the English civil war and, through their depiction, to expiate them: the history cycle as dramatic exorcism of the spirit of suicide. However, when *Richard III* is presented as a standalone piece and removed from the *Henry VI* cycle, a foreshortening of perspective occurs, and a distorting emphasis falls on Richard's individual

²³ April Glaspie, 13th US Ambassador to Iraq. Further details of Ambassador Glaspie's meeting with Saddam Hussein can be found in Wikileaks Cables, (<http://wikileaks.org/cable/1990/07/90BAGHDAD4237.html>). In this cable, following one of Saddam's monologues, we read the following jewel of diplomatic understatement and Husseinian theatrics, 'At this point', writes Ambassador Glaspie, 'the Interpreter and one of the Notetakers broke down and wept'.

psychology and personality. The context of war, cyclical violence, and relentless brutalization of society is marginalized and overlooked. Richard of Gloucester appears as if he were a self-generated phenomenon, an agent—not a by-product—of history. As a result, his actions are reduced into a mere—though brilliant—spectacle of evil. We are attracted to Richard's relentless energy and the compelling, voyeuristic thrill of watching Vice strut, curse, dare and conquer, but we are never invited to perceive Richard's ruthless criminality as a result and consequence of what came before him. Richard is removed from historical causality and we are absolved of an understanding of historical agency. All we can do is hiss, boo, and watch agog as he murders his way through the ranks of society.

To make a coherent approximation of Richard III and Saddam Hussein, one would need to go to the roots of this twentieth-century tyranny. Commence with tracing history that precedes Saddam's rise to power by at least fifty years: the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the imposition by the British of the Hashemite line of King Faisal, the military coup of Abdul Kareem Qassim, the hanging of bodies on lampposts, the Ba'athisation of society, the police state, the rampant networks of secret services, spies and informers, the Iran-Iraq war, his quasi-deification by the Sunni Muslim Gulf States, the West's declared support for Iraq and covert support of Iran, the Invasion of Kuwait, the embargo, and so on and on—layer upon layer of history.

Anything less than this, particularly in the context of the cross-cultural circumstances of this piece, would be to promote a reductive—and reactionary—equivalence between supreme moral evil and Arab-ness. Richard's characteristic vitality, sexual potency, wit, and charm are the same tropes that suffuse the Western Orientalist fantasy of the Arab tyrant; the combination would not convey the nature of evil in a general sense, it would rather convey the nature of evil *Arabs*. It would ineluctably feed Western audiences' worst prejudices about Arabs in general. The conflation of the familiar story of the bottled spider with the less familiar, but highly mediatized, tale of the Butcher of Baghdad was a dangerous and toxic red herring.

Yes, it would be a riot of self-satisfied Western gloating at the cruelty of the hook-nosed Arab. Indeed, it would be a fabulous blood fest in which the Allah wallah hajjis are paraded on stage, ripping each other's throats out, whilst discretely obeying the hymn sheet of an English History play! It's doubtful this Arab Richard would even require a physical deformity—his ethnicity would suffice. 'Arab' would carry the full designation of the curse of nature and the production could save on a hump! Most damning of all, it would be as if the American Occupation of Iraq never took place and my troupe of actors and I would be feted

in Western capitals as the unsuspecting minstrels of the New World Order. My experience as the Arab ‘voice’ in Tokyo, London, and other fine cities had taught me that inter-cultural ‘forums’ accompany, as do valets their masters, the real wars that surrounded me. There was more dignity, I mused, and theatricality in Muntadhar Al Zaidi’s shoe—unceremoniously chucked at George Bush’s head during a press conference in Baghdad as Muntadhar shouted, ‘Taste your farewell kiss from the people of Iraq, you dog!’

But *Richard III* is also a play about the nature of Kingship. As my wife and dramaturge pointed out, the court intrigues, the tribal affiliations, the internal factionalism, as well as the in fighting of the play were reminiscent, above all, of the day-to-day life of the ruling Gulf monarchies. The more I moved away from the notion of transposing the play into the context of Iraq, the more engaging this aspect of the play became.

Underpinning the theme of Kingship is the question of legitimacy. The lion’s share of Richard and Buckingham’s plotting is concerned with overcoming Richard’s illegitimacy and the legalistic barriers between him and the Throne. The murder of Clarence, the infanticide of the young Princes, and the manipulation of popular support to buttress Richard’s claim in the Lord Mayor’s scene all serve as evidence of a recognized, natural pattern of succession that needed systematic subverting. The legal structures governing succession and Kingship needed to be hijacked and destroyed. A crisis of monarchical succession is, by and large, an anachronistic issue for the democracies of the developed world. The Arabian Gulf, however, is not—politically—part of the developed world, and nowhere is the fear around monarchical succession more acute than in the contemporary Gulf Arab petro-states.

The nightmare scenario runs like this: the incumbent King dies with no clear succession in place or illness impedes the nominal Crown Prince from assuming his duties. A power vacuum ensues that brings the un-reconciled factions from the ruling clan into direct confrontation. The resultant conflagration would have the scope and virulence of an all-consuming power struggle that would, it’s feared, rip society apart along tribal, sectarian and ethnic fault lines. Failing outside intervention, civil war is the most likely outcome. This is the unspoken twenty-first century nightmare of these monarchies.

On my way back from a casting trip to Damascus, on the front page of the *Al Hayat* newspaper, I read of the establishment of The Council of Allegiance. The ageing incumbent King of Saudi Arabia created The Council of Allegiance to ensure the smooth transition of power in the event of incapacitation or death of the (future) King or Crown Prince. To a mind obsessed with Richard of Gloucester, and the ‘princely heap’ that surrounds him, the Council’s criteria for the selection of rulers read like an invitation to unmolested villainy:

- Support within the Al Saud (the ruling family),
- Tenure in government,
- Tribal affiliations and origins of a candidate's mother,
- Religious persona,
- Acceptance by the Ulema (leaders of the religious establishment),
- Support by the merchant community,
- Popularity among the general Saudi citizenry

Richard III then, would be neither a journey into the pathology of evil nor the portrait of a spent Arab tyrant but a foray and impromptu around a very real threat: a power vacuum inside a contemporary tribal, petro-monarchy. Here, finally, was a reading that rendered the material both radically contemporary and highly subversive.

Frontal criticism of Gulf monarchs is illegal; it is a state security offence. This was no joke. To take a composite, non-specified, 'Gulf monarchical family' as the direct allegorical referent of the play and to put the characters on stage in realistic costumes, language, and settings meant that the adaptive strategies pursued with the text itself had to be both carefully thought out and economical. The body armour provided against the censor's whip by the Shakespeare label could be moved around the body but not removed entirely. Only though a pronounced fidelity to the outer structure of the ancient, revered—and ostensibly harmless—Shakespearean text would it be possible to deflect the probing eye of both the critic and the censor. The characters would need to maintain their Shakespearean names; location names, for instance, Pomfret Palace, could be allowed to morph into generic names, like the 'Main Square', but there was little to be gained from forcing any further geographical specificity. Divergences from the original had to be surgically placed.

These measures of self-censorship were a small price to pay for the unleashing of the material. Given that the play was to be performed in Arabic and hence unleashed from the letter of the original text, the space for contemporary allusion created by the multiple registers of Arabic—dialect, colloquial, Koranic, classical—was infinite. Geography, for instance, could be inferred from vocabulary choices. Social status, level of education, and even the origins of a character's mother could be implied by language. Thus it was that Richard's opening monologue was developed with a poet²⁴ skilled in Bedouin poetry, which immediately made Richard stand out from the linguistic register used by his brothers, who

²⁴ The poet in reference is Mahdi Al Sayigh.

employed a more urbane, courtly, vanilla Arabic. Margaret's language was littered with ancient, tribal metaphors, elements of her curses taken from Mesopotamian laments, as old as the delta. Suddenly, the play was not about history, or paying lip service to a world classic, it became an action painting that depicted a thrillingly actual or near-future meltdown scenario with a dizzying plethora of detail and possibilities. From here, Buckingham could become a Levantine Arab advisor working for Gulf Arab monarchs and spying for Western interests. From here, one could legitimately populate the imaginary landscape with American Ambassadors, feuding Princes, immigrant workers, fabulous wealth, extreme entitlement and the price of crude oil.

The architecture was now in place to allow the play to become a crucible of internal, domestic political tensions in the Gulf region whilst, simultaneously, acting as a mirror for the political expediency of the western states. The play was set to carry a double charge, able to address audiences on both sides of the cultural divide with sufficient urgency and power to unsettle both. I'd found the way forward: Richard as the nightmare scenario of Gulf monarchies. Music, costume, props and even language (dialect) were made to embellish this imaginary world. There was no turning back.

When making a piece about rulers and tyranny in the Middle East, it's difficult to assess the kind of impact it might have on the rulers themselves. In the touring life of the piece, there was more than one occasion that the play held, as 'twere, a mirror up to nature. A brilliant, picaresque account of the touring life of this piece is contained in the documentary film, *Richard 3, an Arab V.I.P.*,²⁵ which follows a portion of the troupe's tour to the United States and the United Arab Emirates.

In late May 2008 the Ambassador of a Western diplomatic mission in Damascus sent an internal communiqué. In it, the Ambassador relates the curious and grotesque evening when the Syrian President, Bashar Al Assad, unexpectedly presented himself at the performance of *Richard III, an Arab Tragedy*. In so far as this document reveals how intimately theatre and power are entwined in the Arab world and offers a wry, Wikileak-een insight into the nature of international perceptions, it is reproduced below:

Subject: Arab Shakespeare—Bashar al Assad, Richard III and the shadow of Samir Kassir.
Resume: Actors on stage, characters in the audience.

²⁵ Directed by Shakir Abal and Tim Langford, The Culture Project, 2009.

As part of Damascus Capital of Culture 2008, the Opera House presented Richard 3 in a very special production by Sulayman al Bassam. Small auditorium (2-300 seats).

The second night, Friday, 16th May, Bashar Al Assad attended the play in the company of his wife and a reduced entourage, consisting of a handful of bodyguards. The curator of the festival and the Director of the Opera were informed of his visit at the last moment.

The audience (of which I was a part, but that consisted primarily of students) were not expecting the President to attend. What we knew was that Al Bassam had recycled Shakespeare's text (in Arabic) to make a devastating denunciation of modes of government in contemporary Arab states. Some spectators (that rare brand of opposition intellectuals not in prison) refused to stand up upon the arrival of the Presidential couple, as custom dictates.

Did the President know what he was about to see? Opinions vary. Bashar was visibly taken aback by the décor of the play, in which the central element was an oversized portrait of the sovereign of the fictitious state in which the play unfolds (the portrait collapses in the opening moments of the play). Along with the rest of the audience, he laughed when Richard's councillors pleaded with him to take the throne, arguing an Internet survey proves that he has the support of '99 % of the population'. He was amused by the references to Ban Ki-Moon and Amr Moussa. He seemed untroubled by the fierce satire levelled at the Muslim religion. He did, however, give the impression of being less and less relaxed as the piece approached its end; the last part presents the American Ambassador extending support to Richard's ex-partisans, turned rebels. In one of the final moments, an actor reads out a list of 'martyrs' who died under tyranny in which appears the name of Samir Kassir, a leading Lebanese intellectual, assassinated in a car bomb attack.

In brief, the actors were on the stage and the characters of the play were in the audience, the phantoms summoned by the play were by no means fantastical. Curious choice, then, for Bashar to expose himself to this story of lawless, internecine and bloody struggle for power between members of the same family. Philosophically speaking, one may speculate that the President took cathartic pleasure from the piece, even though, as one of his courtiers told me, the President was quite furious at the mention of Samir Kassir (Bashar left without congratulating the actors nor the director, which is against his habit).

Politically, assuming that the President knew—more or less—what he was coming to see, there's a certain courage to show publicly himself contemplating (via the distorting mirror of Shakespeare's genius) the woes of the people of the Middle East and the turpitudes of their rulers. Unless, of course, the explanation is much simpler and that failing in this, as they do in other things, Bashar's services had simply failed to brief him correctly on the tenor and content of this *Richard 3, an Arab Tragedy*.

Nor, we might add, is it impossible that Bashar Al Assad attended the play, as did the Virgin Queen, in the prosaic expectation of discovering a new paean to his own infinite glory.

Improvisation, Dissent, and *The Speaker's Progress*

Former Actress I can bear no more endings.
(*The Speaker's Progress* Act III, Scene 2)

On the psychology of language and audience reception

As we toured these works internationally presenting them at international venues to mostly non-Arabic speaking audiences, it became increasingly clear that audiences were apprehending the work as much through the supertitle screens that hung above the stage as through the stage action and stage pictures. This simple observation led me to incorporate the supertitles themselves into the gamut of artistic tools available to the performance. The general rule with supertitles is that they should facilitate understanding of (non -Arabic speaking) audiences in a clear and efficient manner. They should not try to do more than they can do, they should remain constant and consistent, they certainly should never intentionally try to confuse the audience, or overload them with textual detail or draw attention away from the main event on the stage itself. Supertitles, in short, should be perfectly utilitarian. During the world tour of *Richard III, an Arab Tragedy*, which saw the performance text translated into a wide variety of host languages, I began to play with these rules and, from performance to performance across different cities and languages, would edit and embellish the supertitle slides with an aim to engage audiences directly through the written text above the stage. The

supertitles started to become more dynamic, idiosyncratic and actively responsive to the shudders of excitement, recognition, or laughter in auditoriums. Actors, by the nature of their craft, will respond in the moment of performance to audience reaction, pausing for laughter or embellishing comic and dramatic moments.

The conscious activation of the supertitles into the dynamics of performance, created a new voice in the arena of performance. A more direct and immediate way of disrupting what Hans Robert Jauss describes as the audience's 'horizon of expectation' (1989, p. 197) is through the role of the Anglophone characters in the body of the largely Arabic language plays. Within each of the Arabic-language pieces that compose the *Trilogy*, there are small but consequent roles written in English.²⁶ When these roles take to the stage, the language of performance switches into English and there follows an immediate and tangible engagement on the part of the non-Arab speaking audience with the live action on stage. Language—for non-Arab audiences—is suddenly liberated from its foreignness and thrust into immediacy. This is the theatrical equivalent of the cinematic zoom, and non-Arab audiences engage and identify with the Anglophone actor physiologically, almost despite themselves.

There remains, however, a tangible limit to the success of such strategies of immediacy. There are limits of comprehension in the presentation of cross-cultural theatre. These are the limits created by alterity. There are limits to what can be achieved with text-driven work presented primarily to theatre audiences who do not share the same language, nor the same political and cultural references. *The Al Hamlet Summit*, for example, was a play about a region,²⁷ a vast and multifarious region. Though littered with specific references to place, sectarian identity and time ('Merkava tanks on the border... Shia rebels in the South'), the play never named its setting. The allegorical referent—the where on earth these events were meant to be happening—remained opaque. In its staging, costumes, language, and imagery, *The Al-Hamlet Summit* intentionally avoided defining its allegorical referent in order to maintain an interpretive openness, allowing audiences to fill in the gaps. This interpretive openness was, at times, counter-productive as audiences—and critics—often lacked the requisite degree of knowledge about the Arab region necessary to fill in the gaps created by this approach. As a result of the absence of a specific allegorical referent, there

²⁶ In *The Al Hamlet Summit*, the English language role was the Arms Dealer. In *Richard III, an Arab Tragedy*, the English language role was the American Ambassador Richmond. In *The Speaker's Progress* and in non-Arab venues only, the English language role is the Speaker.

²⁷ See S Al-Bassam 2006, 'Author's Note', in *The Al-Hamlet Summit*, pp. 22-5, University of Hertfordshire Press, Hertfordshire, UK.

were times when it seemed that *The Al-Hamlet Summit* serves to reaffirm general impressions of an over-stereotyped region without enabling audiences to get beyond this ignorance.²⁸ We learn as we go.

If Arab Shakespeare had, on one level, become a ‘forensic’ theatre experience, wherein the production must show and validate both its own knowledge of Shakespeare and current events in the Arab world, *The Speaker’s Progress* would fully engage the limits (and expose the absurdity) of such a task. In this sense *The Speaker’s Progress* represents a self-reflexive critique of the undertaking of the entire *Trilogy*. Significantly, the allegorical referent *The Speaker’s Progress* is no longer an unspecified location in an imagined Middle Eastern territory. Rather, the action is designed to play out in the space of performance itself. The allegorical geography of the play is the auditorium, where the audience and the actors engage in the performance.

The ostensible aim of the performance, as described by the Speaker at the outset, is to make a ‘scientific reconstruction’ of a play from a previous era. The actors on stage are state envoys on a state mission, sent by a totalitarian, religiously orthodox state. The envoys’ actions and ‘performances’ are scrutinised by a state video camera implanted firmly at the lip of the stage, whilst each envoy is closely co-monitored by their fellow envoys.²⁹ The performance’s narrator (the Speaker) describes the mission of the Envoys as a ‘scientific’ one, that aims to instruct overseas audiences and provide a correct understanding of their nation’s cultural history.

The historical moment under revision is the period leading up to and following the independence of many Arab states from colonial rule in the 1950’s and 1960’s, a period that saw a flourishing of arts, music and literature in. This period, typified by the songs of Um Kalthoum, the Egyptian films of silver screen diva Faten Hamama, and the pan-Arab Socialist politics of Jamal Abdul Nasser, is commonly referred to as the ‘The Golden Era’. In the case of *The Speaker’s Progress*, the specific cultural artefact under reconstruction is a play allegedly performed in 1963, under the title *Wa Dar Al Falak*, which, in English, means ‘The Orbit Turns’. The play, as the Speaker informs the audience at the beginning of the performance, encapsulates nostalgia for a more liberal and permissive past. Extracts from the archive recording, though badly damaged and in part burnt, have become popular on social media and have been seized upon by contemporary revolutionary movements to feed social

²⁸ See, for example, P Culshaw 2004, ‘Shakespeare and Suicide Bombers’, *Daily Telegraph*, 1 March.

²⁹ The archive footage of this fictional performance is available for viewing at www.sabab.org.

unrest. As the Speaker puts it, ‘Small, iconic scenes like this have become a source of obsession for many misguided segments of our society. Cited, quoted, uploaded and disseminated, this recording has generated a potent and dangerous mixture of nostalgia and civil disobedience’ (Act I, Scene 1).

To counteract the political threat of a renewed interest in the historical play—and, by extension, a fascination with a potentially dangerous revolutionary past—the State employs the Speaker and a group of amateurs (the Envoys) to scientifically re-write this historical performance and anaesthetise its dangerous contemporary significance. The performance, therefore, of *The Speaker’s Progress* tracks the delivery of a state scripted evening that seeks to control and re-write the past. Within such a rigid and carceral remit, the desires and spontaneity of the non-actors (The Envoys) gradually work to undo the state remit and, ultimately, collapse the state’s ambition to control the writing of the present and the re-writing of the past. Through this perpetual tension between the ‘tyranny of the text’ and spontaneous improvisation / resistance of the actors, the performance develops an allegory for revolution.

The Speaker acts as a narrator for the play and embodies the psychology of language linked to audience reception. One of the central conceits of the performance hinges on the fact that the Speaker addresses the audience in their home language (the language of the receiving venue), whereas the other envoys speak to one another and undertake the reconstruction in their own, distinct language: namely, Arabic. The Speaker often translates for the benefit of fellow actors (the Envoys) on stage and reassures the audience in their home language following multiple technical ‘errors’, improvisations, and involuntary interruptions made by the Envoys.

Such identification is perhaps most striking when it is momentarily suspended, as in Act II, Scene 2, when the Speaker is forced by the state censor to read out a forced confession. At first the Speaker attempts to relay the confession to the audience orally in English, as he has throughout the reconstruction. However, the Speaker is stopped by the (euphemistically named) Representative of the Tourist Board and forced to read the prepared document, written in Arabic:

Speaker (*In Arabic.*) I was the originator of the transgressive improvisation. I displayed wilful negligence in my duty towards the committee; I obscured the true origins of the 1963 play: an adaptation of William Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night*, written in 1601. I have conspired with this foreign source. In my defence, I say only that my real intention was to

highlight the majestic historical transformation prophesied in the Shakespearean play that brought, 40 years after this play was written, the Puritans to power in England. The Puritans, keen protectors of civic health and their nation's standing in the world, enforced the closures of all theatres that harboured the 'sinful' entertainment. England became a great nation because of the Puritans. Many scholars, religious and otherwise, verify this. (*He signs the written confession, the Representative of the Tourist Board pockets it...*)

Throughout the reconstruction, language has been used as a tool of political activation within the live context of the performative moment. The Speaker has used his proficiency in the language of the audience—a language unknown to the state censor who shares the stage with him—to make a series of off the cuff remarks, gags, witticisms, and improvisations. When detained and forced to read a confession by the Representative of the Tourist Board, the written text emerges as the medium of surveillance and state oppression. Divergence from the written medium into the clandestine realms of orality is identified as a direct threat to the state order. Ignoring this threat is punishable by physical abuse, as evidenced by the Speaker's injuries, dealt to him offstage by the state censor. With the Speaker's switching into Arabic, the Anglophone audience feels the loss of comfort in identification. The raising of the linguistic barrier in this moment darkens the mood of the play as audience members come to feel, more and more, a sense of discomfort in front of the reconstruction. The banishing of the Speaker from the space of orality, improvisation, and political self-authoring is the state's mode of controlling the reconstruction. Orality, therefore, is identified as a suspect and politically uncontrollable medium of communication. This criminalising of 'orality' within the performance alters the audience perception of the supertitles that, as a written medium, become associated with the state's desire to control the writing of the performance and birth in the audience a sense of suspicion and unease.

Language becomes both a means of communication and a means of control, a means of signification and a means of creating obscurity. This radical duality of language is brought to the fore in the gulling of the Mullah / Malvolio scene (Act II, Scene 5). In this scene, the Mullah (played by the Representative of the National Tourist Board, the State Censor) is led to believe that he will win Thuraya / Olivia's admiration and amorous acceptance if he is able to prove to her his ability to master foreign languages. The mischievous Tagtiga / Tony Belch character offers to feed him appropriate lines in foreign languages. A kind of free translation begins in which the Mullah/ Malvolio character delivers lines fed to him in Italian, Korean, and Chinese by Tagtiga. The Mullah is soon led to overcome his initial misgivings and

bashfulness by the wildly exaggerated and sexually charged reactions of Thuraya / Olivia to his utterances in foreign tongues.

The comic device culminates when the stimulated Mullah attempts to indicate his desire to copulate and is assured by the ever devious Tagtiga / Toby Belch that the verb ‘to copulate’ in English is actually ‘defect’. ‘I want to defect!’ cries the Mullah, ‘You, me defect! Me, you defect! Defect two times! Ten times! Defect, defect, DEFECT!’ Led into the uncontrollable domain of orality and improvisation, the State Censor / Mullah/ Malvolio figure is duped into speaking deeply incriminating words in a language he is completely unfamiliar with.³⁰ A potent mixture of comedy and desire undoes the hegemony the state had tried to establish over the language of the performance.

Having achieved their objectives, the rebel envoys immediately stop the gulling charade and lead the Mullah to the video camera at the lip of the stage. The ever-watchful eye of the state has recorded the Mullah’s utterances of betrayal. A kangaroo court scene follows in which the Mullah is accused of publicly pronouncing treasonous thoughts, and the Mullah is perfunctorily led into a cage. In this way, through the obscurities of language, *The Speaker’s Progress* explodes the limits of authority and illuminates the subversive power of dissent. As related by the reviewer from *The New York Times*: ‘what comes through clearly is that even in the middle of totalitarianism, art can carve out space to dissent’ (Zinoman, 2011, n.p.).

On openness to context

“This most happy wreck!”

Twelfth Night, Act V, Scene 1

As I moved towards making the *The Speaker’s Progress*, it seemed to me desirable to have Arab (as opposed to Japanese, European or American) co-producers. Further, it seemed significant that the play might have its premiere inside the Arab world. This production, I told myself, will be different. Not only will it take its inspiration from a comedy (*Twelfth Night*)³¹ as opposed to a Shakespearean portrait of carnage, it will also be entirely co-

³⁰ A director must decide how to deal with this play of languages, but to provide the English reader with a sense of the stage performance, the published text (included in the second half of this thesis) places lines to be spoken in Arabic in italics and those in English—used principally in direct address to the audience—in bold.

³¹ The idea of using *Twelfth Night* as the play-with-the-play of *The Speaker’s Progress* was suggested by the co-conceiver of the piece, Georgina van Welie.

produced by Arab funding bodies, as opposed to depending on the funding of Western arts organisations. However, when negotiations with Arab Gulf funders collapsed and I faced, once again, the inscrutable indifference of Arab state cultural organisations, I found myself asking, who am I making this work for? Where is this work's audience? What possible difference can this theatre project make to the Arab world when it is hardly permissible to perform inside the Arab world? What is the utility of a theatre project that cannot be delivered to its intended audience?

This spirit of disillusion and bitterness fuelled the first phases of development of *The Speaker's Progress*. In my portrait of the retired theatre director, the Speaker, a man who is attempting a last roll of the dice under the fatal pretence of a regime apologist, I drew heavily on the biography of Dmitri Shostakovich as related by Solomon Volkov in his book, *Testimony*. Shostakovich's forced—and highly public—disavowals of his own works in order to avoid state censorship and perhaps even death, seemed to carry some parallels to my own sense of deep frustration. Shostakovich's *Testimony* fed the portrait / self portrait that emerged of the Speaker; namely, a theatre maker gasping for air inside a system that, through a combination of method and indifference, had succeeded in forcing the oxygen out of individual and popular imaginations. In its initial formulation, as performed in Kuwait on February 22, 2011, *The Speaker's Progress* ended—with emphatic fatality—with the suicide of the Speaker. A mobile television unit that had been gracefully sent by Kuwait National Television recorded the performance itself and, in an ironic moment of reality mimicking art, the Ministry of Information in Kuwait subsequently destroyed the archive of this work without allowing me access to it!

I'd embarked on the creation of *The Speaker's Progress* with a conscious desire for closure: formal closure by concluding a trilogy of works and artistic closure by ending a long standing relationship to Shakespearean texts as points of departure and inspiration. Whilst rehearsing the second iteration of the play in between Damascus and Beirut in the later half of 2011, the events of the popular uprisings known as the Arab Spring had well and truly begun to take hold of the Arab world. Regimes in Tunis and Cairo had fallen and regimes in Libya and Damascus were under threat. Many rehearsals were interrupted to follow the latest developments through news bulletins on *Al Jazeera*. Out of this political upheaval, the ending of the play was altered. In this heady atmosphere of fear and excitement, the suicide of the male protagonist, the Speaker, seemed tautological and unnecessary. So much more was suddenly made possible by the upheavals happening around us. It was this feeling of possibility that allowed for the creation of a new ending. An ending led and delivered by

female voices. So, despite embarking on a project that sought closure, a major aspect of *The Speaker's Progress* was in fact openness to political and historical contexts that informed both the Arab region and the play itself.

This openness to political and historical change becomes an allegorical window into the post-revolutionary moment in the final scene between the Former Actress and Representative of the Women's League. Left to their own devices, having completed the delivery of the script but still finding themselves in front of an audience, they indulge in a poignant moment of self-expression:

Rep. Women's League	Tell me your name, without shame, without fear?
Former Actress	My name is Amal Omran.
Rep. Women's League	Where are you from?
Former Actress	I'm from a village called Sadaf. I can't see you.
Rep. Women's League	Tell me your mother's name, without shame, without fear?
Former Actress	My mother's name was Fatima. Yours?
Rep. Women's League	Marianne. I can't see you.
Former Actress	Seeing's not everything. Describe the colour of your eyes without shame, without fear.
Rep. Women's League	My eyes are the colour of coffee with a drop of milk. Yours?
Former Actress	The colour of earth after rain.
Rep. Women's League	I can't see you.
Former Actress	Does it matter? Tell me what you do not know without shame, without fear?
Rep. Women's League	I'm ignorant of most things. But—
Former Actress	Have you tasted love? I'm drowning. I thought I could re-create myself, lose myself in the city...
Rep. Women's League	We will step out of this tower, beyond the line of the sun...
Former Actress	Live a hundred lives in the passage of a night.
Rep. Women's League	Past the men with patches on their eyes—
Former Actress	I thought life was an orchard of pomegranates—
Rep. Women's League	And wear our freedom like a new spring dress—

Former Actress	And time, a basket in my hand...
Rep. Women's League	It's material as thin as butterflies' wings... untouched by knives.

The scene or 'script' here is attributed to an anonymous young author, but the moment between the women is personal, autobiographical, and, ultimately, non-dramatic. We end the reconstruction, and thus its continual deconstruction of intention, language, and cultural representation, with the live 'utterance', the live construct of Bakhtin's heteroglossia. He writes, 'This active participation of every utterance in living heteroglossia determines the linguistic profile and style of the utterance to no less a degree than its inclusion in any normative-centralizing system of a unitary language' (Bakhtin, 1992, p. 272). Post-reconstruction, post-revolution, without Speaker, without text or anti-text, beyond ideology and anti-ideology, there is a vacuum filled only by fearless and open declarations, utterances, of identity and desire. 'But how shall we live?', asks the Former Actress. 'I want to fly!', replies the Representative, as the time for the reconstruction and play runs out.

On January 4, 2011, Mohammed Bouazizi, the Tunisian physicist-fruit seller, dies from the burns of his self-inflicted *auto-da-fé*. The image of his act—his body, his funeral, the state snipers, the swelling masses, the rise of the chanting tide—all pitched and tossed from phone to phone, screen to screen, tweet to tweet, terminal to terminal, city to city; to Cairo, then Yemen, the East of Libya, Manama, and the South of Syria. Here was the end of hidden time, time resurfacing, time again. Millions took to the streets to reclaim their dignity. Dictators fled their palaces, were committed to hospitals, or put under siege. Arab history re-joined the living, and the debris of old systems crumbling and new systems erupting continues to spume, swirl, and fall. *The Speaker's Progress*, in its subsequent touring life, was not immune to these developments. The actors on this theatrical journey were not left untouched by the forces of chaos and disorder unleashed in the overturning of the status quo in the Arab world, so long ruled by military autocrats and tyrants.

So now, after all these years of resistance through making theatre about things that end badly and, too often, bloody, there's a need to make space for the same euphoria that filled the Arab capitals. We now feel an urgent need to change the ending, even while acknowledging that euphoria must be lived first before it can be staged. During the preview performances of *The Speaker's Progress* in Kuwait in late February 2011, there was

something hugely liberating about being swept up in the euphoria that consumed the Arab world. But the signification and dramatic language of these upheavals needs more thought. What has happened since January 2011 has made way for many alternatives to the traditional ideas of power and people and even the relationship between writing and reality. Endings should no longer be endings but beginnings. Suddenly, there is so much life to be lived, so much that demands imagining and re-imagining. It is in that re-imagining that Arab theatre needs to embrace its aesthetic and civic responsibilities to help shape an ethics of the post-revolutionary imagination.

I concluded *The Speaker's Progress* with a proposition, which I firmly believe: that the light shed by the events of the Arab Revolutions demands new texts, new ways of imagining. Critique uttered from behind Shakespearean masks, the masks of others, is no longer a valid critique for this phase of Arab drama, this moment of Arab history. The awakenings have shattered the mirrors and the masks. In the new tale, in which we all are actors, we must be willing to stand 'without fear, without shame', and, at times, without script.

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Product: *The Arab Shakespeare Trilogy*

The Al-Hamlet Summit

Delegates

Claudius – *The Ruler*

Gertrude – *His wife*

Hamlet – *Her son*

Polonius – *The Minister*

Ophelia – *His daughter*

Laertes – *His son*

Outsiders

Fortinbras

Arms Dealer

UN Messenger

***Act One, Al-Fajr*³²**

A conference hall containing six conference desks. Downstage centre, a roughly constructed grave. Claudius throws a flower on the grave and exits.

Scene One

Gertrude Why is your face so black, Hamlet?

Hamlet It must be syphilis; been with one too many whores, mama.

Gertrude Is this wit?

Hamlet Fact! There are many more whores than in my father's time.

Enter Laertes and Ophelia.

Gertrude Hamlet!

Hamlet You should take a stroll, those tall buildings, lit with neon; brothels, brothels!

Laertes Welcome back, Prince. My condolences; may Allah increase your wages in heaven.

Hamlet And yours in brothels, Laertes. My Lord?

Hamlet No, no ... I hold you in the highest esteem, Laertes; your father was a loyal, devoted, loving subject to mine, and I rely most entirely on your devotion to our line.

³² The names of each act are those of the five daily prayers in Islam. They are descriptions of mood, not indicators of time.

Enter Polonius.

Polonius His Dread and most Honourable Majesty, All Mighty Leader of the Armed Forces, Commander of Air, Land and Sea; President Elect of this Noble Assembly begs your gracious attentions – session has begun.

Enter Claudius, all stand as the National Anthem bellows across the conference hall.

Claudius In the Name of Allah, The Bounteous, The Merciful. *(The sound of the conference bell indicates the beginning of the session: all sit.)* By my decree ten thousand palms have been planted and two public gardens opened in my brother's memory. *(All clap.)* The time for mourning is over. Today the dawn bursts forth fertility and – like the phoenix that comes shimmering up in flames from its cold bed of dust – my wife from my brother's ashen hand has leapt, her cheek all moist with tears and wet with the dew of renewal, to partner me in this crowning enterprise: the dawn has risen upon the people of our nation: the New Democracy begins today! *(Assembly claps.)* The nation claps: I clap for the nation. We ride on the crest of a great wave, born of the will of the people and the needs of History: I am not its leader: I am its lamb. *(Clapping.)* Hamlet, you do not clap? Hamlet?

Hamlet It is the heat, my Lord, it brings the worms up out of the earth and just beneath the film of our perfumes—

Claudius No one doubt the enormity of your grief, Hamlet—

Hamlet I am dazed by the stench of rot!

Claudius You are morbid, when the world celebrates around you, you grieve while others rejoice, this fetish-sadness sits like a stain on the New Democracy: what is past is past, what is dead is dead, what rots will rot.

Hamlet I'll spare you my afflictions, my studies await me; my flight leaves tonight.

Claudius The invisible forces of evil besiege us from all sides: enemy leaflets circulate like rats in our midst; Fortinbras's troops armed with millions of dollars of foreign equipment are lined upon our border, if the city were quiet enough you could hear them breath; you will not leave.

Hamlet *rises from his desk.*

Gertrude Hamlet, I am your mother. The University has long been the source of regressive trends amongst us, already it has changed you: your father and I have deemed it council to keep you away from such throbbing beds of lunacy.

Hamlet Closer to your throbbing beds of shame.

Gertrude The country weeps with you, Hamlet, its wounds are open, and need your balming presence. Do not tar your father's memory with such eager departure. Do not force knives into your mother's bleeding heart. Stay with us Hamlet.

Polonius I will count.

They vote.

Hamlet When I got off the plane I smelt her; on the runway, in his welcoming embrace in the guards' salute I smelt her. On his hand and on his cheek – her scent – on his neck and on his back and on his balls her scent. Oh God, I can smell her now. Oh filth, filth, he enters her, he goes inside, he does, he goes inside her again and again ... I'll stay! (**Hamlet votes.**) I'll stay!

Claudius Glorious solidarity blesses our nation's first assembly. Let enemies beware of the Nation United, let Fortinbras skulk upon our borders, I declare three days national holiday in celebration of our New Democracy.

Polonius Come, secretaries and ministers: the press, the people, the world awaits.

*A bell announces the end of the session. Exit all except **Hamlet** and **Ophelia**.*

Scene Two

Hamlet, Ophelia. *Prayers in the distance from many sides.*

Hamlet Why are you spying on me?

Ophelia I'm looking at you.

Hamlet And I ... am looking at you.

Ophelia I will go, then.

Hamlet No, no – Ophelia?

Ophelia I'm here.

Hamlet Has it been so long?

Ophelia Three summers ... I got your voice notes, thank you.

Hamlet My voice notes ...

Ophelia I know them all by heart; 'when the skies fall in and the seas are set ablaze ...'

Hamlet It was a different world then.

Ophelia And me?

Hamlet You're a woman now.

Ophelia Won't you look at me?

Hamlet Now?

Ophelia Why not?

Hamlet Not now – I will, I will. I long to look at you, to stare at you, to drink from the sight of you, but not now. I can't. Perhaps it's the heat, my blood is not used to this heat, my blood is not what it used to be – I do love you, in my heart of hearts and with my own body I love you. Go now ... (*Writing.*) Through the interminable night that awaits us ... With your own eyes.

Jets pass in the distance overhead.

Scene Three

Enter Polonius, Claudius.

Polonius I've got 300 men working round the clock gathering up the leaflets.

Claudius Forget the leaflets, burn the townships, all of them – I want them all burnt by dawn.

Enter Gertrude.

Gertrude What's the schedule for tomorrow?

Polonius Breakfast with the Russians first thing, press conference, then it's the opening of the new parliament. Madame will be with us?

Gertrude Yes.

Ophelia returns to her desk. A bell announces the beginning of the session.

Claudius (*At his desk.*) What remains for today, Polonius?

Polonius My son, my Lord, asks your permission to leave the city.

Claudius Why?

Laertes To join the ranks of the valiant defenders of our nation's sovereignty.

Claudius Good, a young man like him needs to see some action. Let him be stationed in the South, in front of Fortinbras and overseeing the militias.

Laertes I will do all in my power to be worthy of this honour.

Claudius I'll make him a general.

Polonius My Lord!

Claudius Nothing is too much for the son of Polonius.

Polonius I am forever yours.

Claudius I thank you all for your devotion. Time is neither with us nor against us, our enemies are vigilant, they scurry while we sleep. I bid you all good night.

*A bell announces the end of the session. Exit **Hamlet, Laertes, Ophelia.***

Gertrude I have a proposal. It concerns Ophelia.

Polonius What has she done?

Gertrude Laertes is leaving. She will be so alone.

Polonius She has many pursuits; she is an excellent pianist, reads profusely, rides regularly, speaks French, German and Mandarin—

Claudius She is very beautiful.

Gertrude Hamlet, given that he's staying with us, will have far too much time on his hands: Ophelia is vulnerable.

Polonius Do you suspect my daughter of anything?

Gertrude I am a woman, Polonius, and I sense the seeds of scandal before they are blasted on to the wind. I am also a mother and a wife. My son has long been of an inclination towards your French-speaking, piano-riding, horse-tinkling daughter and now he is of an age. I propose their marriage. Claudius?

Claudius What has this to do with the New Democracy?

Polonius It would be one of its symbols.

Claudius It would entertain the press?

Polonius A sense of shared responsibility, my Lord, may help the Prince overcome this negativity towards the New Order.

Claudius Marriage would geld him.

Polonius Madame, our house is no stranger to royalty; honour and blood have tied us together over centuries; my daughter will be delighted.

They vote. Motion carried.

Gertrude Excellent.

Polonius Marvellous.

Claudius The future is ever brightening. To the New Democracy!

Polonius and Gertrude The New Democracy!

A bell announces the end of the session. Exit Gertrude.

Claudius The townships, Polonius.

Polonius I'll give orders to start the burning immediately.

They exit.

Scene Four

Laertes, *clearing his desk. Enter Ophelia.*

Ophelia To the mountains?

Laertes Yes.

Ophelia You'll die, Laertes, they'll send me a YouTube of you hanging from a tree.

Laertes I cannot do diplomacy. We sit and talk like drunkards, waiting for others to solve our problems.

Ophelia Wait just a few days, things will settle.

Laertes Nothing will settle Fortinbras but a bullet in his head. Look at me: I'll miss you. Your eyes, Ophelia, your eyes ... They are not the innocent jades they used to be, another colour has tinged them. A little sparkle, or, or, or a little breeze, or, or, or a little ... aching? An aching in your eyes, Ophelia, the aching of virgin fields for the plough? When the world lies frightened in its bed do you pour lotions over your body and move in time with the breeze? I know you do, but that is not what courts and Kings are for, is it? What are they for? Capturing, invading, sacking, splitting: virgin thighs, virgin honour, virgin sex; your name, spiked on the royal cock, our titles spattered with royal cum, and poor sister of Laertes left heaped on the floor among the broken shells of promises and the burnt-out shitloads of gold. Never, Ophelia, never! Tame this lust in your eyes, tame it, woman, before I tame it for you.

Enter Polonius.

Polonius General Laertes!

Laertes *salutes his father and exits.*

Ophelia Don't leave me.

Polonius They tell me you have been lurking in orchards with the Prince Hamlet as

the sun goes down. Or was it by the pool? Where do you lurk exactly?

Ophelia We walk sometimes at dusk before the evening prayers.

Polonius Don't walk at dusk, don't walk at night, don't walk at dawn and don't walk at noon. Right now I want to be able to hear your footsteps at all times, wherever you walk will be within the orbit of my hearing, within the circle of my infinite love; right now my love describes the boundaries of your universe; don't walk outside it into the abyss beyond, where your footsteps and your cries will go unheard. What's the time?

Ophelia Near midnight.

Polonius Get to bed, there may be trouble tonight.

Polonius *returns to his desk. Gertrude enters Claudius's office, climbs onto his desk and raised her skirt.*

Scene Five

Hamlet, *praying at his father's grave.*

Hamlet Let the skies fall in and the seas be set ablaze, let the material world collapse and markets go untended; let wild beasts roam through cities and infant girls be buried alive for no crime; make hell fires burn fiercely and bring paradise near; but lay the records upon, inspire me with your command, show me my labours, I hold my life in no esteem, I carry not an atom's weight of good, I have grown fat with idle life, let me not be mad, but lay the records upon, inspire me with your command, inspire me with your command – (*The love-making in the conference room climaxes.*) who's there? Who is it?

Arms Dealer A friend.

Hamlet What do you want?

Arms Dealer No, please I understand you perfectly. Sorry, I'm—

Hamlet I know who you are.

Arms Dealer Not disturbing you am I? I—

Hamlet Stay.

Arms Dealer Needed some air: couldn't breathe in the hotel.

Hamlet It's the fires, they've started the fires.

Arms Dealer Mmm ... Your father was a great man, the world is not the same for his loss.

Hamlet Are you American?

Arms Dealer (*Quoting.*) ‘Vast oceans of savagery consume the world, false authority towers from Mecca to Jerusalem, from Jerusalem to the Americas and man is on the brink of a great precipice.’³³

Hamlet How do you know that? Those are his words.

Arms Dealer *hands him a green leaflet.*

Hamlet I can’t see, give me a light.

He holds out a lighter.

Hamlet (*Reading.*) ‘Forensic evidence leaked from the post mortem indicates that our great leader was murdered. His cardiac arrest was induced by sodium nitrate injected into his ear via a syringe, an assassination technique used by the secret police under the leadership of his brother and assassin Claudius.’ Where did you find this?

Arms Dealer They’re all over.

Hamlet (*Reading on.*) ‘Whilst Hamlet, the late King’s son, continues to lead the life of the murtad³⁴ dissolute, gambling and whoring the nation’s millions in the playgrounds of Europe.’ Oh God! ‘The People’s – the People’s’ – bring the light closer – ‘Liberation Brigade will avenge this sickening murder and will show no mercy to those who weep and mourn, weep and gnash their teeth’ (*The Arms Dealer sets fire to the leaflet.*) ... the evil forces of imperialism have found a willing agent in the figure of Claudius!

Arms Dealer *withdraws.*

Screaming jets pass overhead; hundreds of leaflets fall from the sky.

Hamlet ‘Raise your might and God’s holy wrath against the horned Satan that soils our earth and the Greater Satan that enslaves our people and the world. We will not rest until God’s labours are done. We will not rest until His labours are done.’

Hamlet *gathers an armful of leaflets and exits.*

Scene Six

Ophelia *at her desk, Hamlet enters.*

Hamlet (*Shaking.*) My father’s murdered.

Ophelia *holds him for a long time, he weeps.*

Ophelia I’m here – I’m here—

³³ ‘Vast oceans of savagery consume the world’, from the Introduction to Al-Sayid Qutb’s, ‘Milestones’.

³⁴ ‘Murtad’ Arabic, meaning ‘apostate’.

Hamlet Be with me—

Ophelia Always.

Hamlet Hold me.

Ophelia I love you – I love you.

Black out.

Act Two, Al-Zuhr

Scene One

Morning.

Ophelia *alone at her desk, wearing a headscarf.*

Polonius *(At his desk.)* Today is a very good-looking day, correct? A day for positive images, rousing words, transparent communication and I need you to look the part, Ophelia ... what the hell is that? Are you mad? *(Walks briskly over to her and snatches her headscarf.)* What's this?

Ophelia I'm more comfortable like this.

Polonius You look like a terrorist! Do you know how many photographers are out there? Why are you crying?

Ophelia Last night—

Polonius Last night what?

Ophelia Hamlet ...

Polonius Hamlet!

Ophelia Needed some help with his speech, but the speech was not making sense; shells fell all night, the fires burnt all night and the electricity cut out around three. It was a bad night – that is all!

Hamlet *enters, goes to Claudius's desk, takes out files, scours through papers and written memos.*

Polonius *(Finding green PLF leaflets.)* Where did you get these?

Ophelia I don't know.

Polonius Answer me!

Ophelia He brought them.

Polonius This runs deep, Ophelia, very deep. I only hope I can save you from the fallout. Come with me. Come, come, come. (*Senses someone rummaging at Claudius's desk.*) Hamlet? (**Hamlet** *runs away.*) Hamlet!

Scene Two

Enter Arms Dealer, Claudius.

Arms Dealer Your Highness! Power suits you. You look like a King.

Claudius I was not expecting you so soon.

Arms Dealer Early bird catches the worm.

Claudius And blood draws flies.

Arms Dealer Buzz, buzz, Claude.

Claudius Keep your voice down.

Arms Dealer This is a most echoey corridor, you should have it filled: busts, statues, fallen enemies, stuffed and garroted, I know some excellent sculptors.

Claudius How long will you be staying with us?

Arms Dealer As long as I am welcome.

Claudius We are preparing for war. It may not be in your interests to stay here very long.

Arms Dealer I'm on a little tour. He called me yesterday, most upset I have not been to visit him yet, you know how emotional he gets – 'You filthy double-crosser, you promised me this, that – be careful, you're not dealing with the Chechnyans now!'—(*Laughs.*)

Claudius Who's this?

Arms Dealer Fortinbras!

Claudius *Inshallah*, everything's okay?

Arms Dealer He's so endearing, so forward-looking, so modern somehow.

Claudius I'll send you the thing you like. I'm so happy you are with us.

Arms Dealer So am I.

Claudius We'll have a party.

Arms Dealer No!

Claudius Yes, a large one. I want you to meet the ministers.

Arms Dealer I'd love to meet them, of course.

Claudius Tomorrow – this evening! I'll arrange it. You must excuse me. The new parliament's opening in – *(Looks to his watch.)*

Arms Dealer Two hours and 12 minutes – I know. Good luck.

Scene Three

Bell announces the beginning of the session.

Polonius A minister's loyalty to his King and country goes beyond the rational bonds of duty. A love that defies the usual spheres of human employment. A love that, in my case, can be compared to the loyalty of the last soldier, that unsung hero, who, knee-deep in comrades' blood, surrounded by thousands of enemy tanks, helicopters, infantry and mortar, swells with the knowledge of imminent death, bulges with patriotism, fires the last rounds from his outdated Russian rifle and falls struck by a bullet to the heart that continues to beat for at least two hours more! Irrational love! Absolute devotion! Complete surrender to the will of King and country – THAT is what I offer.

Gertrude Does my breakfast have to suffer this man's devotion?

Polonius My breakfasts are yours, Madam.

Claudius Explain yourself.

Polonius *(Adjusts his position.)* If I were able to explain this matter to myself, I would be much better placed to explain myself; but this matter is far beyond ... Your son is mad, Madam! Mad! He is being drawn further and further into extremist circles of thought and action and he is mad, I tell you!

Claudius The parliament opens in less than an hour.

Polonius A matter of minutes: Ophelia.

Ophelia *stands up and reads Hamlet's poems.*

Ophelia The refugee who stands at the wire fence of your heart –
no numbers to his name, no credit, no guns;
all sewage and exile,
lays siege to your soul, with the pain of his songs.

Polonius Note the paranoiac tendency in this innocent-seeming foul-smelling ditty. Note the distrust of all authority.

Ophelia When the worlds fall apart
 And the skies cave in

(Enter Hamlet.)

 When hell fires consume the light
 And paradise is brought nearer this earth:
 On that day, know that I am looking for you.

(Exit Hamlet.)

Polonius Note the apocalyptic imagery. Note the yearning for violent and comprehensive change to the world order. I have studies that will elucidate further on the links between this sort of fantasy and terrorist activities.

Gertrude These poems are the work of an adolescent, Polonius. They prove nothing!

Polonius Now, look at what I found in his drawers! *(Displays PLF leaflets.)* Not one, not ten, but thousands of them, thousands!

Claudius This is capital!

Ophelia Grief can force—

Gertrude Grief, yes! Grief!

Ophelia Temporary insanity!

Claudius The marriage must be delayed.

Ophelia What marriage?

Gertrude Until we have more proof of how far his grief may have changed him.

Claudius More proof then, Polonius? Gertrude Polonius

Ophelia What marriage?

Polonius My daughter will supply proof.

Ophelia What marriage!!

Gertrude Really? How?

Polonius Ophelia?

Ophelia Yes?

Polonius The next time you meet with Hamlet you will ask him – in a roundabout and

honeyed way – questions like, ‘Where have you been? What have you been writing? What are you doing with your nights?’—

Ophelia You think I can do that?

Gertrude You’ll make an excellent liar.

Ophelia I lack your Highness’s skill.

Gertrude What did she say?

Claudius We were all born bad liars, you’ll learn. Ask him – ‘Do you go to the mosques?’

Polonius ‘Who are your friends? What are they called?’

Claudius ‘What are you reading?’

Gertrude Someone should be with her, she could lie.

Polonius We’ll be with her, Madam, leave it to me: (*Proposing a motion.*) ‘The Royal Marriage to be delayed, pending further proof of the Prince’s seditious leanings.’

They vote: the motion is carried. Ophelia exits.

Claudius ‘They Deceive and God Deceives, but God is the greatest of Deceivers!’³⁵

Bell announces the end of the session: all exit.

Scene Four

Hamlet *alone near the grave. In the distance we hear the sound of a military band and pronouncements on the occasion of the opening of the New Parliament.*

Hamlet The villages of my heart have been emptied,
their pavements orphaned to the wind.
all spirit of man in me aged between 14 and 60
has been taken down to the waterfront
and settled head-first in the shallows.

When noon walks across the square like a widow,
I am the ghost bell that swings on churches
I am the minaret with its tongue in the sand
I am the child with a bullet in its arm weeping amongst the rocks;
I am the mute that contemplates the ape
while the wind writes my shame upon the sea.

³⁵ ‘God is the greatest of Deceivers’ Qur’an (3:54).

Enter Arms Dealer.

Arms Dealer You're not at the opening.

Hamlet Celebration's lost its charms.

Arms Dealer We're alike, we prefer being in the shadows.

Hamlet Are you following me?

Arms Dealer Maybe.

Hamlet How's the hotel?

Arms Dealer Been upgraded. There's a lot of talk about you: some people think you're still in Europe, others say you're planning to escape, but nobody really knows what you're doing, do they?

Hamlet *(Looking at the horizon.)* When I was young the horizon had more colours, more light, more promise ...

Arms Dealer I was thinking, perhaps, we could be friends. You need someone to confide in and I know what it is like to be isolated. You have a great future, we would like to develop something with you, promote your agenda.

Hamlet What do you know about phosphorus?

Arms Dealer It makes little white puffs of smoke, like a barbecue.

Hamlet Does it burn?

Arms Dealer Haven't you heard the story of the gravedigger's baby?

Hamlet Tell me.

Arms Dealer When the curfew was over, the baby was five days dead, and they brought it the gravedigger. He prepared a deep and narrow grave, and when the prayers were done, he shovelled the first mound of earth into it: the tiny corpse exploded into flames and the gravedigger was blinded. That's phosphorus.

Hamlet Can you sell me some?

Arms Dealer I can.

Hamlet Good.

Arms Dealer It is necessary for a prince to understand how to avail himself of the beast and the man. If men were entirely good this would not hold, but because—

An explosion in the distance, the military band has gone silent and is replaced by sirens.

Hamlet What was that?

Arms Dealer I've no idea.

They exit together, hurriedly.

Scene Five

Enter Claudius, Polonius.

Claudius Find them!

Polonius No one has claimed responsibility, no tip-offs, no calls, nothing.

Claudius The pipeline is on the rocks—

Polonius I have got 20 PLF members under torture—

Claudius The investors are terrified!

Polonius The Shia leaders are being rounded up, I've got 50 mobile squadrons in a net around the city, men scouring the sewers, whoever they are, they will not escape me.

Claudius I want the car-bombers' faces across the papers by tomorrow. Or I'll write your resignation for you.

Enter Laertes.

Polonius I have summoned you Laertes to brief us on developments in the South.

Claudius What news with you, Laertes?

Laertes My lord, the signs of war are gathering fast. Until this morning, Fortinbras had three thousand men stationed 20 miles south of our border. Apart from two small skirmishes, all has been quiet for the last two days. But one hour before dawn a convoy appeared on the horizon that threw fear into the souls of our men and had civilian families running in droves for their cars. Over the hills came not a convoy, but a juggernaut, a 12-mile column of Merkava and British Centurion tanks – three tanks abreast – moving at pace towards our border. It was as if Fortinbras's entire army was advancing as one giant armoured centipede. The Merkavas and the Centurions tore up the tarmac surface of the highway as they advanced and bathed the landscape in a blue fog of exhaust smoke. They have moved up so much equipment that the coastal highway and the sea are covered with tanks and heavy artillery for 20 miles.³⁶

Claudius We are familiar with these tactics, Laertes, I see no cause for alarm.

³⁶ From Robert Fisk's 'Pity the Nation'.

Hamlet *enters carrying a piece of an exploded car. He affects deafness.*

Polonius Where were you?

Hamlet Sorry I'm late. Have you seen the traffic?

Laertes *(To Claudius.)* No cause for alarm, my Lord?

Polonius You weren't at the parliament.

Hamlet What?

Polonius Parliament!

Claudius *(To Laertes.)* None.

Hamlet Lament? Lament!?

Polonius Where were you?

Hamlet I'm finished with laments. Tell Uncle. Finished. There's a party out there! Hundreds, thousands, all spattered in blood, screaming in the streets! Ecstatic masses foaming with nationalistic ecstasy. It's brilliant!

Claudius Hamlet, there was a terrorist attack at the opening.

Hamlet Here we are. Look, oh look!

Claudius A terrorist attack.

Hamlet Quack? What Quack? Quack quack! I found this!

Polonius He's mad!

Hamlet It's a trophy. I'm giving it to Ophelia as a sign of my bleeding heart! No, too sad. I'm giving it to Uncle! Yes! Uncle! Give me a kiss and I'll give you this trophy.

Claudius We'll leave him.

Hamlet Oh come, Uncle, your kisses aren't as prized as Ophelia's lips. Please take it, Uncle, give it to mother as a sign of your mis-shaped love, oh, yes she'll take it. Uncle, the nation's will is in my arms, take it from me—

Polonius My lord, we're leaving you now.

Hamlet Uncle! Uncle!

Black out.

Act Three, Al-Asr

Scene One A

Time: 7:45 AM.

Arms Dealer Parliament opened with a bang!

Polonius Listen to this. (*Opens a folder and reads.*) ‘The treacherous enemy are dwarves. They spit at the giant, but the giant picks them up and crushes them. They are traitors, pirates and mercenaries.’

Arms Dealer We call them terrorists.

Polonius I like this word. Will you write it for me? (*Offering him a pen.*)

Arms Dealer Of course. (*Writing.*)

Polonius Terro-ri!

Arms Dealer Terro-rist.

Polonius Terror-roo!

Arms Dealer Terror-rist.

Polonius Terror – um!

Arms Dealer Terrorist!

Polonius Terrorist! Excellent word, much money in this word.

Arms Dealer Yes ... About the money.

Polonius Money? No problem, no problem.

Arms Dealer When?

Polonius When? When. What does it mean, ‘when’?

Arms Dealer Upon signing of the contract.

Polonius In full?

Arms Dealer (*Arms Dealer seizes Polonius’s skull and kisses him.*) In full! (*Exits.*)

Polonius My pen ... Terrorist!

Scene One B

Time: 10:15 AM.

- Hamlet** Who is Claudius?
- Laertes** You don't get it, do you?
- Hamlet** Who is he?
- Laertes** Our supreme and sovereign leader.
- Hamlet** Take my eyes, my nose, my sword, my women! Are you a tribesman,
Laertes?
- Laertes** What do you want? The labourer has no factory to work in and the thinkers
are all asthmatic and wheezing.
- Hamlet** ‘As you are, in such a way you will be ruled.’³⁷
- Laertes** The people need a God!
- Hamlet** Fine. I know where you stand.
- Laertes** Forcing internal division is political suicide: the strategy of an angry child.
- Hamlet** He is a murderer.
- Laertes** So are all leaders.
- Hamlet** He killed my father.
- Laertes** Fortinbras wrote that line, it's enemy propaganda and you know it.
- Hamlet** I'll prove it!
- Laertes** Well, let me know.
- Hamlet** I want you with me here, Laertes, the real fight is here.
- Laertes** And let me know when you've finished.
- Hamlet** What?
- Laertes** ... apologizing for your own futility.

Scene One C

Time: 13:30 PM.

Gertrude Where was that – Paris?

³⁷ ‘... as you are, so you will be ruled’, from the Hadith of the Prophet Muhammad.

Arms Dealer Zurich.

Gertrude Of course! Zurich! And how are your dogs?

Arms Dealer I've just acquired a magnificent Pekinese stud.

Gertrude And I have my Mexican Hairless bitch – we must introduce them!

Arms Dealer What a monster we will make.

Gertrude You are such a charmer.

Arms Dealer You are such a purebred!

Gertrude Is there anything I can do for you?

Arms Dealer You are so kind. Anything I can do for you?

Gertrude You're so cavalier! I don't want to trouble you, but I have a farm in the South—my private retreat: it needs some work, it doesn't feel safe any more and I was wondering if you might—

Arms Dealer I just love the countryside! I believe I'm already familiar with the place.

Gertrude Really?

Arms Dealer (*Showing her photos.*) This it? You look so magnificent in your natural state!

Gertrude I'll keep these if you don't mind.

Arms Dealer Only copies, I'm afraid.

Gertrude As I said, it needs tighter security.

Arms Dealer My pleasure. Where are we going?

Gertrude To the sea, you don't mind do you?

Arms Dealer I smell it from here.

Scene One D

Time: 13:32 PM.

Hamlet The enemy on the border is the illusion they feed you, the illusion they want you to believe.

Laertes People are dying every day, I see them, I see the bombs that kill them, I see

the soldiers that fire them, I hear the politicians that direct them, it's not an illusion.

Hamlet The real enemy is here, in the palace, amongst us.

Laertes There will be no nation to fight over unless we defeat Fortinbras.

Hamlet We'll have no nation to lose unless we destroy the rot that devours it from within.

Laertes Hamlet, May God be with you. I'm leaving you this. (*Places a pistol on the table.*)

Exit Laertes.

Hamlet Laertes! My brother.

Scene Two

*Gertrude is presenting jewellery to Ophelia: a necklace, a bracelet, a ring.*³⁸

Ophelia Who are these from?

Gertrude From Hamlet! Now listen to me; no politics, no religion. Talk about love, not sex, love. He's so *sensitive*, he cannot bear *vulgarity* – ask him about his poems, ask for some more, nothing silly or girlish, please. You know how intelligent he is, you must keep him interested!

Ophelia A—

Gertrude And don't cry! When you are married, you'll look back at all this and laugh out loud.

Ophelia We will, we'll laugh.

Hamlet (*At his desk, holding the pistol Laertes left him.*)
 It doesn't weigh much, why should it?
 It delivers. It has a number on it. It's well made;
 its coil, mechanism, bolt and trigger have
 evolved over centuries, its secrets embezzled
 from father to son, it is a perfect machine.
 It is mine to polish with Egyptian cottons
 while I career dreamsick, from office to office,
 slowly murdering the fire that made my soul,
 feeding my disease from door to door,
 round and round this porn shop of sores.
 No martyr's passion blazing in this body,

³⁸ The collection of jewellery is the 'Taqam' that is traditionally presented by the groom's mother to Arab brides.

no vision of heaven,
 no yearning for justice, no aching for change,
 my intestine is like a pig's:
 it baulks at nothing;
 my hatred as imperfect as my love;
 nothing heroic, nothing repulsive,
 just a futile mediocrity, made bearable by my disease,
 that drowns with a torturer's patience and criminal ease
 the fires that made my soul
 from here to the day I die.

(Reading the serial number on the pistol.) 552497.
 The disease I carry is stronger than me,
 This disease I call Myself.
 The self is a bitch that won't let go.

Enter Claudius and Polonius, disguised as women, wearing long black abbayas and burkas.

Claudius Thank you, Gertrude.

Gertrude corrects the black abayya that covers Claudius. She exits. Polonius and Claudius prompt Ophelia in the opening lines of this dialogue.

Ophelia Hamlet, I am praying for you.

Claudius taps her on the back to speak louder.

Ophelia Hamlet, I am praying for you.

Hamlet Ophelia! I can hear your prayers.

Ophelia Thank you for your gifts.

Hamlet What gifts?

Ophelia It doesn't matter.

Hamlet I don't know if I have ever told you ...

Ophelia Don't ...

Hamlet I must, I have this terrible need to change myself, or rather, rather there is a change that is coming ...

Ophelia Don't tell me now—

Hamlet ... and if I don't tell you now—

Ophelia Tell me now, then, tell me, speak!

Hamlet Ophelia?

Ophelia Yes.

Hamlet What gifts? What gifts! (*Long pause.*) Has it come?

Ophelia What?

Hamlet The hour that takes you away from me?

Ophelia No!

Hamlet Must I be forced to hate you now?

Ophelia No! It is far away, very far.

Hamlet But the hour has come.

Ophelia I am still here.

Hamlet No, no you are gone.

Ophelia You love me.

Hamlet No, no: I do not blame you, but, but, but ...

Ophelia Try to love me ...

Hamlet Nor can I forgive you, you do understand?

Ophelia Don't do this.

Hamlet How can I love you?

Ophelia Try ...

Claudius and Polonius smother her mouth.

Hamlet I will clean this land, I will make it pure, I understand, I do understand, but I will cleanse it for you, I will prepare it for your return, even if it costs me my life, I will clean it, I will purge it, blood will flow, I will make blood flow in torrents, I swear in my father's name, I swear in the name of Allah but you will return, Ophelia, you will return. (*Exits.*)

Ophelia (*Sung.*) My master, where are you going?
 Ai! Why don't you take me with you?
 Take me to the town.
 Ai! To sell me to the *bazargi*
 For a pinch of gold

To gild the palace door.³⁹

Exit Ophelia. A bell announces the beginning of the session.

Gertrude She is ruining my son's mind. I want her sent to the farms.

Polonius What farms, Madam?

Gertrude The work farms in the south. She can work on mine. She is to go.

Polonius Madam is enraged. This ugliness offends her and blurs her judgement—

Claudius Gertrude, we refuse haste.

Gertrude I insist.

Claudius Polonius, let her seek refuge outside the city for a few days. Marriage will not be spoken of again. It puts our son in ill-humour. Investments are however crucial to the economy at this stage of the war-effort, there are car bombs exploding at every corner, we have not seen a tourist in weeks and his temperament seems regressive and uncondusive to the common good; national security demands that Hamlet too is sent away. Where to, Madam?

Gertrude Beirut?

Polonius Too many militias.

Gertrude Damascus?

Claudius Too many lions.

Polonius Cairo?

Gertrude Too many loafers. Sana'a?

Polonius Too many rebels.

Claudius Rabat?

Gertrude Too many druggies.

Claudius Khartoum?

Polonius Too many blacks.

Gertrude Jeddah?

Claudius Too many sticks.

³⁹ The words are a rough translation of a Bosnian folk song.

Gertrude Tehran?

Claudius Too many turbans.

Polonius Paris?

Claudius Too many women.

Gertrude Washington?

Polonius He'd never get in.

Claudius London?

Polonius and Gertrude London!!⁴⁰

Claudius Get him on the next plane to London, call the foreign secretary, tell him he's coming to gamble along Piccadilly, book him three months at The Berkeley and give him a state credit card.

Polonius My Lord, Fortinbras's tanks shelled the airport this morning, the tarmac is in ribbons.

Claudius Close the highway, he can use that to take off.

Polonius I'll count.

They vote.

Polonius Carried.

Gertrude My son cannot leave without a proper send-off!

Polonius She's right, it might reflect badly.

Claudius A party, then!

Polonius A small state occasion.

Jets pass overhead. A bomb blast in the distance.

Claudius The future is bright. I thank you.

A bell indicates the end of the session.

Delegates rise to leave.

⁴⁰ Other capital cities used in performance: Baghdad? Too many Iranians! Kuwait? Too many Saudis! Dubai? Too many Russians! Qatar? Where? Too many tombs!

Claudius *lingers momentarily in the corridor. Enter Hamlet.*

Hamlet Hell's plagues on your mother and your mother's mother and your mother's mother's mother. Do not gawp at me you imperialist lackey! Don't stare you leader-by-proxy! Agent! Do you know whose son I am! His name makes you tremble!!

Claudius *exits.*

Hamlet Futile man! *(To the musicians.)* Hey you. Play for me, would you? Play an old, old *maqām*.

They play.

Scene Three

Ophelia Are you the devil?

Arms Dealer Are you attracted to me, young lady?

Ophelia If I am?

Arms Dealer Have you ever been with a man before? Alone in the dark?

Ophelia *(Silence.)*

Arms Dealer You are trembling, come closer.

Ophelia Lean your face towards me, close your eyes.

She pulls out a knife.

Arms Dealer You're so passionate! *(He twists her arm and throws her to the floor.)* Oh, the sweet yelp of pain – angels of the night, hide your virgin faces; the devil has his cock up one of your flock! What do you want, Ophelia, tell me I'll satisfy you, what is it you want?

Ophelia I want a bomb. Qumbila!

Arms Dealer Qubla? A kiss?

Ophelia Qumbila – a bomb.

Arms Dealer A kiss! Say it again!

Ophelia Qumbila!

Arms Dealer Qumbila!

Ophelia A bomb.

Arms Dealer Kiss!

Ophelia Bomb!

Arms Dealer Bomb!

Ophelia Kiss!

Arms Dealer A little one or a big one?

Ophelia Any.

Scene Four

Hamlet *standing on the edge of the central area of playing space, an area thus far unused in performance.*

Hamlet This empty space. Why is it empty? This pit our words fall into peat-like and mulch, where secrets fester and moult into dross, dirty little space no one dares cross. Here ... *(He enters the empty space.)* in this dark, oily lake of lies, I see swans; here I'll dig and dance and jig, loop earthworms into a tie and set light the royal tips and vaginal lips that top their living and tail our dead.

There'll be screaming in corridors and bodies lurching between the lawn sprinklers in naked, animal haste. Who then could say Hamlet stood by and did nothing?

Scene Five

Polonius, *reading a map, enters the empty space, followed by Gertrude.*

Gertrude Here?

Polonius Yes.

Gertrude Are you sure, Polonius?

Polonius He was most insistent, Madame, he even drew me a map!

Gertrude Let me see.

Claudius *enters.*

Claudius You're joking!

Gertrude Claudius, it's his last night.

Claudius Find somewhere else.

Gertrude Don't be ridiculous!

Claudius I have never stood there, no one has ever stood there, I do not see why I should stand there to humour the whims of your sick child.

Gertrude Claudius, please!

Claudius Polonius, get out of there immediately!

Enter Arms Dealer, bursting into the empty space.

Arms Dealer Good evening, your majesties.

Gertrude Hello! What a surprise.

Claudius *enters the empty space.*

Claudius We have been waiting for you.

Arms Dealer Hamlet told me you were having a little occasion.

Claudius I am so happy you could make it.

Arms Dealer You look splendid, Madame.

Gertrude *Merci. (Enter Ophelia.)* God, Ophelia, you look half dead.

Polonius She has been a little under the weather.

Ophelia I have been throwing up all afternoon.

Arms Dealer Poor child, do you have a fever?

Ophelia Don't touch me!

Gertrude She is upset that Hamlet is leaving.

Polonius On the contrary, she is upset because she is leaving tomorrow.

Arms Dealer I'm only trying to help.

Polonius Thank you!

Claudius Television been arranged?

Polonius They're filming as we speak. Delayed transmission of course.

Claudius What's the order of events?

Polonius We'll shake hands and embrace, swig some juice and before you know it he'll be on the plane.

Claudius I'm sweating.

Polonius I'm sorry. (*Polonius dabs Claudius's brow with a handkerchief.*)

Enter Hamlet with a hobby horse, dressed as an Abbasid general. This scene is performed by Hamlet with hysterical speed.

Hamlet Good evening, tribe, family, friends.

Gertrude Hamlet! What is this nonsense?

Hamlet Nonsense! I am preparing for war, haven't you heard the enemy are on the borders! Ask him! Tonight we honour the elders! And stroke the horse! The horse of war!

Polonius (*Humouring him.*) Why is your horse blinkered, my Lord?

Hamlet To protect it from the glances of envy and Ophelia's poisoned smile.

Arms Dealer Is the horse hungry, my Lord?

Hamlet Ravenous, always! Horse of war!

Arms Dealer A horse of war must munch, my Lord! (*Arms Dealer offers a handful of sugar cubes.*)

Hamlet Ah! Sugar cubes, what a noble warrior! Please feed the horse of war. Uncle, as with all things, you must start. Ummm ...

Hamlet lunges at Claudius and stabs him with a stage knife. Claudius gasps. Hamlet withdraws the stage knife, pushes the blade in with his finger and laughs. His horse's head droops.

Hamlet Oh, it's dying! Sodium Nitrate, Uncle quickly! Oh, if mother could weep, my horse might rise again. Not one little tear, mother? Dried up? (*Gertrude approaches Hamlet, who gnaws her ear viciously.*) Oh, look, it's rising, thank God mother has some moistness left in her! Risen erect. Uncle could not kill it! Of course not, indigestion, that's all – (*Hamlet grabs Polonius by the testicles.*) Horse of WAR! Munch some more! Stroke it, mother, but don't kiss it, it is a very randy horse. Ophelia – you look pregnant – Uncle have you sent her to the front yet? (*The horse nuzzles Ophelia's breast and rubs its head against her groin.*) She really must make a visit – raise the morale of all those thousands! (*Ophelia exits. Hamlet to the Arms Dealer.*) Oh, but you, you are all sugar, it's enough for the horse to lick your hand. Now let us sing: 'Our blood is the price – oh cowards you are lice – but Glory gory Glory to the Nation!' (*The assembled join in reluctantly.*) To war! I thank you all. To war! To war!

Exit Hamlet.

Claudius We are sending him to London, for tests.

Arms Dealer I know some specialists.

Gertrude Really? Perhaps you could give me their names.

Arms Dealer Gladly.

Polonius How would you like to present this affair to the nation, my Lord?

Claudius As is!

Gertrude What is that terrible noise?

Claudius What's going on, Polonius?

Polonius Some interference on the intercom, don't worry, my Lord.

Hamlet, *over the conference loudspeakers*.

Hamlet Wait, please, wait, please.

Claudius Sort this out!

Arms Dealer Perhaps he's armed.

Claudius Polonius, you dog!

Hamlet There's more, my dears.

Claudius This is unacceptable.

*Over the speakers, **Hamlet**'s voice repeating 'Uncle, Uncle'.*

Gertrude Hamlet, stop this immediately.

Claudius Polonius – your gun!

Hamlet Ladies and Gentlemen! I come in peace! (*Rounds of sniper gunfire, offstage.*)

Polonius Guards! Guards! Guards!

Scene Six

A bell announces the beginning of the session.

Claudius He is a threat! I want him liquidated.

Gertrude I'll speak to him.

Claudius Polonius!

Polonius My Lord!

Gertrude I said I'll speak to him.

Claudius Give the order.

Gertrude (*Forcefully.*) My sex, Claudius! My sex tames your allies, my sex undermines your enemies, galvanizes the masses and underwrites your loans. Nothing without me, do you realize? Nothing! I will speak to my son.

Claudius By tomorrow.

Polonius I'll accompany Madam. We must fear the worst.

Claudius Thank you, my wife. (*Exit Gertrude.*) I've emptied the funds, Polonius, you'll see me later about your needs.

Polonius The generals are waiting for your directi—

Claudius Let them wait!

Exit Polonius.

Scene Seven

Claudius (*Alone, opening a briefcase full of dollars.*) Oh God: Petro dollars. Teach me the meaning of petro dollars.

I have no other God than you, I am created in your image, I seek guidance from you the All Seeing, the All Knowing Master of Worlds, Prosperity and Order. This (*Extracting a bundle of dollars.*) for the nation's new satellite TV station, this (*Another bundle of dollars.*) for God's satellite; this for the epic about my valiant life, this for God's film industry; this for surveillance networks across the capital, this for God's installation people; this for primary, secondary and higher; this for God's curricula; this for me. This for the leader of the opposition party; this for the Austrian torturer; this for the editor of the national press – or is he dead? This for the MD of Crude Futures: all of Heaven's gifts down to the cracks of their arses and I, the poor, sluttish Arab, forgoing billions to worship you: I am transparent, so transparent my flesh emerges like calf's milk – I beg you, Lord, give me the recognition I need and help me calculate what is good.

Is it not charm, is it not consummate charm to slouch on silk cushions and fuck and be fucked by all the flesh dollars can buy? I am a fine apprentice, do I not learn well what you taught me? This for you, oh God.

Help me, Lord, help me – your angelic ministers defame me, they portray me as a murderer,

a trafficker of toxins, a strangler of children, why is this God? I lie naked before you while they deafen you with abuse. Let me not be disagreeable to you, God, I do not compete with you, how could these packets of human flesh compete with your infinity? I am your agent, nor am I an ill partner for your gluttony and endless filth. I do not try to be pure: I have learnt so much filth, I eat filth, I am an artist of filth, I make mounds of human bodies, sacrifices to your glory, I adore the stench of rotting peasants gassed with your technology, I am a descendant of the Prophet, Peace be Upon Him, and you, you are God. Your angelic ministers want to eliminate me, throw me like Lucifer from the lap of your mercy, but who brought me here oh God let us not forget, who put me here?

In front of your beneficence, I am a naked mortal, full of awe: my ugliness is not unbearable, surely it is not? My nose is not so hooked is it, my eyes so diabolical as when you offered me your Washington virgins and CIA opium. *Oh, God, my ugliness does not offend you now, does it?*

Your plutonium, your loans, your democratic filth that drips off your ecstatic crowds – I want them all, Oh God; I want your Vaseline smiles and I want your pimp-ridden plutocracies; I want your world shafting bank; I want it shafting me now – offer me the shafting hand of redemption – *oh God let us be dirty together, won't you?*

Without you, I cannot bear to be myself, cannot, cannot bear it.

Enter Hamlet holding a pistol to Claudius's head.

Hamlet The only way to change the geography of a conflict is to have infantry on the ground firing bullets into flesh. I am the infantryman, this is the basement that reeks of human faeces and rotting meat, my emotion is the emotion of the fighter who wants to stop an invasion; here my enemy cowers, human, alone. I see the drops of sweat glistening on your skin, I can smell your fear, I can hear you breathing, I feel your fear now: stop breathing ... Stop ... breathing: stop breathing!

Hamlet's conviction collapses. He returns to his desk. Black out.

Act Four, Al-Maghrib

Scene One

Enter Polonius.

Polonius (*Seeing Claudius, semi-naked.*) My Lord!

Claudius Tell the generals: we are alone.

Exit Claudius.

Enter Gertrude. Polonius hunkers at his desk, unseen by Hamlet. A bell announces the beginning of the session.

Gertrude Hamlet, you are a threat to state security.

Hamlet Mother, you are a threat to state morality.

Gertrude Is it drugs?

Hamlet Is it sex?

Gertrude Talk to me, child, are you collaborating with the mullahs?

Hamlet No! It is I who ask you: do you commune with the devil, Madam? Is he by you now, enveloping you? Ha! Does the devil sit by you Gertrude, does he whisper in your ear? Ha! Does he hold you to him and thrust his hand onto your breast – is he there? Ha! Is he there? Is he there?

Gertrude *(To Polonius.)* Leave now.

Polonius *prepares to leave the desk in haste, clattering objects as he moves. Hamlet hears the clattering and shoots the pistol in the direction of Claudius's desk, killing Polonius.*

Gertrude What is this!

Hamlet From Allah we emerge and to Allah we return. Run, blood, run across the sewers and the graves, stop up the mouths of vermin and hypocrites, the squall that begins in the East moves with mighty power over the seas. Oh, mother, mother, I am still so young, so young to feel this weight of heaven. Your husband is a murderer!

Gertrude You are the murderer!

Hamlet He murdered my father!

Gertrude Your father died of his own failures!

Hamlet You are with the devil! The power of the djinn has eaten your mind.

Gertrude Look at you, panting! Do you desire me? You are sick!

Hamlet The earth spins faster in its rapture as the dawn of truth approaches. *(He strikes her.)*

Gertrude You dare to hit me!

Hamlet I dare more!

Gertrude Bastard son of a bastard father!

Hamlet God cannot forget your iniquities!

Gertrude *(She spits on him.)* On you and on your father.

Hamlet You have outwhored Babylon!

Gertrude Get off me, get your hands off me.

Hamlet God's sharia allows you to be married to your husband's brother only when there are no other men available to you. Will you not learn, woman?

Gertrude I will have you stripped in the streets for this, I will open your stomach with a breadknife.

Hamlet Rude Gertrude!

Gertrude I will hang your balls from my balcony!

Hamlet In the time of the Prophet it happened thus, a whore passed from King to pauper, from murderer to thief, until she found the path. Will you learn? Lewd Gertrude! In the tractions of your loins do you not think on death, woman? Has lust made you mad?

Covers her eyes and raises his weapon to her womb.

Remember Allah! Remember Allah! Remember Allah!

Over the loudspeaker: Verse 28, Surra 5 of the Holy Qur'an: 'And never say to your father or mother tut, nor hold their names in vain.' Hamlet, hearing this Qur'anic voice, is cowed and amazed. He returns sheepishly to his desk.

Gertrude Gertrude will never forget this shame you have poured upon her, this stain of blood will not fade.

Gertrude *exits.*

Hamlet Oh God, I have trespassed! Beware a mother's vengeance.
Mother forgive me. Mother?
Mother? Mother? Mother?

Scene Two

Enter Claudius.

Claudius Terrorist, terrorist, terrorist! Hamlet, we will not let an insidious terrorist coward push our nation to the brink of collapse—

Hamlet Look around you: embargoes closing in from all sides, world leaders refuse your calls, my country's assets are frozen.

Claudius Your terror will not dictate our policy – you are exiled!

Hamlet So it has come to this?

Claudius Yes. Now. Go.

Hamlet It is a far, far better thing I do now than I have ever done. Where is it to, Uncle?

Claudius London!

Hamlet Ah! London! I will not be alone. I will eat little, grow thin, write tracts and become the prized animal of European liberals. Good, Uncle, good; a perfect choice. Farewell Uncle!

Claudius I would dismember you now were it not for the glare of the world upon us. Let their lights die down – then I'll strike, invisible.

Scene Three

Claudius Do you think I am a monkey?

Arms Dealer Not at all, Claudius.

Claudius Take this. (*Handing a list.*)

Arms Dealer (*Reads.*) Five hundred howitzers, 12 B-2s, 4 Stealths, 5 submarines, 500 Centurions; 17 Cruise Missiles; 200 hawks; 300 sparrows; one million rounds of ammunition ... a week?

Claudius Don't ever tell anybody I am a monkey, or I'll have you shot, do you understand?

Arms Dealer Perfectly.

Claudius Shhh.

Arms Dealer Shhh.

Scene Four

Enter Hamlet, barefoot.

Hamlet Peace be upon the grave dwellers.
I am ill, grave dwellers, I am ill,
sick with the lies of the living,
that have spread like shredded pieces of the night,
its end resembling its beginning.
How is the end, grave dwellers, how is it worse than the beginning?
I will pass these 40 nights amongst you,
your bones will be my books, your skulls will be my lights,
I will hold my tongue amongst you,

And eat from the dreams of the dead.
He enters his father's grave.

Scene Five

Gertrude Claudius! I'm drunk!

Claudius *(On a phone.)* I want the guard doubled on the ammunition dump – forget the water supply ...

Gertrude How can you leave me here, I'm drunk!

Claudius What about the reserve generators? I know that ... hold them back as long as you can ... I will reward you, General.

Enter Laertes.

Laertes The dogs of war are baying for your blood; Claudius, give me my father!

Claudius I have missed you, Laertes.

Laertes Where is my father?

Claudius Missed your ethical guidance—

Gertrude It's a coup!

Claudius Your loyal instinct, your strength. I can feel the sniper's aim warming the back of my head – what has happened to you, Laertes?

Gertrude Little Laertes is mounting a coup!

Laertes I am waiting for your answer.

Gertrude Tell me Laertes, if you kill him, will you marry me?

Laertes I'll brand you like a devil's trollop.

Gertrude I'm not your mother, I'm your Queen!

Laertes Give me my father!

Claudius Your father is with me. He has lost his voice. He asks me to ask you why you have betrayed him.

Laertes I never betrayed him.

Claudius He asks you if he ever left you wanting for anything.

Gertrude Raise your voice, Polonius!

Laertes Why should I want for anything?

Claudius Then why do you align your militias with Fortinbras? Is it for shekels, is it arms, is it fear? What do you lack, Laertes?

Laertes Show me my father.

Claudius Hamlet holds him hostage.

Laertes Where?

Gertrude In his grave.

Claudius Gertrude!

Gertrude Dead!

Ophelia *appears, veiled, in a pre-recorded video message on the conference projection screen.*

Ophelia Are you recording? Can I start? In the Name of God The Bounteous, The Merciful.

Laertes Ophelia!

Claudius She is mad, Laertes.

Ophelia The one who has turned me into a refugee has made a bomb of me.⁴¹ I have tried to speak the language of women, I have tried to forgive, on many nights I severed my tongue but my silence bleeds from my mouth. Here I am the animal that the world forgets, I have tried to speak the language of man but lying no good no change can make to it of injustice in life.

I want people outside to know this that I will express with my body what is not able for to express politics and mighty nations so I go to my God pure in my soul in my dignity I am pure.

Scene Six

Claudius and Laertes *removing the body of Polonius.*

Claudius Hamlet kills Laertes' father, Hamlet drives Laertes' sister out of her mind. Have Laertes' guns fallen silent?

Laertes What are you asking me?

⁴¹ The opening line is from a poem by the Palestinian poet, Mahmoud Darwish.

Claudius Should I smother the press, should we keep this quiet?

Laertes Announce it! And I will announce my revenge in the plumes of smoke that raze his villages to the ground.

Claudius Those villages are your villages, I am making you Lord of the Southern region, we'll announce it tonight. *(A bomb blast, followed by a woman's scream.)* Will you let me guide you?

Laertes I'm listening.

Claudius Hamlet is returning with a flock of émigrés, communists and degenerate scum that the nation spat out years ago. He claims to be the Redeemer! To raise support among the people, he'll go the Holy Mosque to lead the Friday prayers; you will meet him there with one thousand men dressed in the nation's colours. Half accidentally, your men will trample on the holy grounds and cause such brazen offence to his zealots that they will revolt there and then with stones, with tyres, with—

Laertes What for?!

Claudius A third of the nation.

Laertes A third for me and a third for my father.

Claudius Half!

Laertes I'll do it. And if you lie, I'll kill you.

Enter Gertrude with a scream.

Gertrude Your sister, Laertes. She came into the palace when the sun fell into the trees. When the guards were warm and droopy like the oranges her eyes were blazing and alive, her dress swollen with the wind as if with a phantom child, with fantastic wailing she moved beyond the guards into the courtyard, a swollen angel against the black sweep of the tarmac; I went towards her and as she raised her arms as if to salute the world, a button came loose from her shirt and tittered onto the steps, I remember this button, Laertes, this little disc of mother of pearl; and leaning over to retrieve it on my way home when – no – when I was there, then in the rolling flesh in the twitching limbs and her body was a well I washed myself in: how hot it felt across my face, how hot her lungs, her intestines how hot.

No one is exempt.
Exemption is impossible.
I carry my guilt, I carry it.
But, but, but ...
Am I still beautiful?

Black out.

Act Five, Al-Isha'a

Scene One

At Ophelia's desk, delegates laying flowers, muttering prayers.

Hamlet *enters in a short white thowb, with a long beard – he has transformed his appearance into that of a radical Islamist leader.*

Hamlet I loved her with a noble love and I killed him. I killed your father and mine. Yes, you can look at me now, Mother. I did this out of love. What is the death of the father, Laertes, what is it, when defeat is the very secret of our rebirth?

Gertrude Hamlet!

Hamlet Mourn your father's death to salute the living, but do not mourn to salute the King! I want you with me in the reshaping of our nation.

Laertes You bastard!

Hamlet Is this fidelity, Laertes? Standing next to the King in your father's very shoes – you are not the shadow of the dead, you are death's double!

Laertes *strikes him.*

So be it! What now? Do we saddle our horses, sharpen our swords, make prayers and prepare for Kufa,⁴² thus do we rise again! Can that be? Can it be?

The other delegates return swiftly to their desks. The Arms Dealer is, for the first time, inside the Conference space.

Arms Dealer Your father would be proud.

Hamlet He's dead and you – still here?

Arms Dealer I'm leaving. My work's done. I am happy to have been of assistance.

Hamlet I will make you regret your assistance.

Arms Dealer Destiny makes dark plans—

Hamlet Get out.

Arms Dealer However we curse and spit, kick and writhe—

Hamlet Out!

Arms Dealer We nudge each other towards its manifestation!

⁴² The Battle of Kufa was the first in which Muslims fought against fellow Muslims.

Hamlet Out!

Arms Dealer Fortinbras will be so pleased!

Hamlet Depart!

Arms Dealer Farewell.

Scene Two

Hamlet He who can speak without tables, without chairs, without lies let them speak. *(Silence.)* This silence will bury us all.

A bell announces the beginning of the session.

I bear witness that there is no God but Allah and that Mohammad is his messenger. I Hamlet, son of Hamlet, son of Hamlet and the rightful heir to the throne of this nation. My rule will crush the fingers of thieving bureaucrats, neutralize the hypocrites, tame the fires of debauchery that engulf our cities and return our noble people to the path of God. Our enemies comprehend only the language of blood, for this, the time for the pen has passed and we enter the era of the sword.⁴³ Do not pretend amazement! Violence breeds princes and princes breed violence, that is our curse! And may God raise the souls of his Martyrs to the gardens of Heaven.

All vote. Gertrude hesitates.

Gertrude Whereto this madness, Hamlet, whereto?

Hamlet No more words please, mother, words are dead, they died on our tongues. Admonishment is a weak form of faith, now we must mouth meaning with our flesh.

Gertrude votes. *War has been declared. The conference bells begins to repeat. Enter a messenger.*

Messenger The world community represented in the UN has sent you this message: that it is prepared to send peace-keeping troops to the region and organize a summit meeting chaired by disinterested political figures to discuss the differences between your parties.

Hamlet Invite your masters to a private showing to see the dead dancing before their killers,⁴⁴ perhaps you can teach us the art of slaughter and acquittal of the slaughterer.

Messenger You will die, Hamlet.

Hamlet No, I hurry to the dignity of life and the eternity of death.

⁴³ Osama bin Laden in a speech broadcast by Al-Jazeera Satellite Television on 7 October 2001.

⁴⁴ This image is from a poem by contemporary Iraqi poet, Muthafar Al-Nawab.

Exit messenger.

Claudius History lays its greatest challenge before us. Just two hours ago, our forces—

A pre-recording (sound or video) of Claudius's address to the nation begins to play and overtakes Claudius's words in the event sphere on stage.

Each delegate, realizing what has happened, rises from his/her desk, clears away the last objects of value to them, opens the munitions box beside them,⁴⁵ takes out the weapon inside it and walks forward, listening blankly yet astutely to the speech being broadcast overhead.

As they walk forward, press reports intercut into Claudius's speech, reporting the latest developments of the civil war. Amongst these gathering mounds of information, each delegate waits for the confirmation of their own deaths. When they hear it, they collapse, dead. To be performed in a manner as simple and unforced as possible.

Claudius's address to the nation Just two hours ago, our forces began an attack on terrorist positions belonging to Hamlet and his army. These continue as I speak.

This conflict began when Hamlet laid siege to our democracy, our values and our people through a brutal series of kidnappings and terrorist bombings that have killed many innocent victims and shocked the world community. Tonight this battle has been joined.

The following news reports, intercut into Claudius's address, should be broadcast in Arabic:

News Report The streets of the capital are in flames, buildings have collapsed through the endless onslaught of air attacks from the F-16 fighter planes still loyal to the King. Meanwhile, Hamlet the Crown Prince, and leader of the People's Free Army—

Claudius's address to the nation As I report to you, air attacks are under way against military targets within the city. We are determined to knock out his lethal, nuclear potential; destroy his chemical facilities; much of his artillery and tanks will be destroyed.

News Report In an unconfirmed report, Queen Gertrude has been killed whilst trying to prevent the King's tanks from surrounding her son, who is trapped inside The Grand Mosque.

Gertrude dies.

Claudius's address to the nation We will crush the terror not with books and speeches, but with courage and good judgement and responsibility. Some may ask why act now? Why not wait? The answer is clear: the world can wait no longer.

⁴⁵ This stage direction is, perhaps, too directorial. In my own production of the piece, the munitions boxes referred to were brought into the conference room by each of the delegates after their meeting with the Arms Dealer. Laertes, who is the only delegate who does not meet with the Arms Dealer, picks up his father's munitions box. However, it is entirely possible to imagine this scene taking place with no munitions boxes, no movement downstage of the delegates and so on, in the same way that it is possible to imagine playing this entire text without conference desks, corridors and other paraphernalia of the conference or international summit.

News Report As the Multinational Peace-keeping Force sent by the United Nations arrived off the coast yesterday, General Laertes and Hamlet's forces were engaged in arm-to-arm combat throughout the streets. At 10am this morning reports arrived that Laertes was struck by mortar fire and his condition is described as critical.

Laertes dies.

Claudius's address to the nation I had hoped that when we took our decision in historic debate to exile him, that would be the end of this criminal life, but I have been proved wrong, and today the world will see that error corrected.

News Report The Army are sparing no one. Hamlet is firing mortars from the Mosque and Claudius is firing from the palace.

Claudius dies.

Hamlet In the name of God I have invented a curse
That writes the history of other nations in my own people's blood.
Perhaps the hardest thing is to find the courage to wake in the morning and face this
landscape of ruins that are our lands.
This perception of truth too late,
Is hell.

Hamlet dies. Pause. Enter Fortinbras.

Fortinbras Faeces, intestines and sweat. Only dead humans can smell like that. I have biblical claims upon this land, it is empty and barren and my presence here is a fact that has not been invented. It won't be easy, terrorism is not yet defeated, but the pipeline will be completed within a year, and hunger will be eradicated, the homeless will find refuge, the old will die and the young will forget, the poor will find wealth and this barren land will be seen to bloom.

What we see here can never happen to us. For this is the dawn and the birth of the Greater Is—

White noise fills the conference room censoring Fortinbras's voice. Fortinbras repeats the attempt to pronounce the word and, each time, his voice is overwhelmed by white noise.

Iz— ...

Izzzz ... Izzzzzzzzz ... aaaaaa.

Sudden silence.

With your help the future will be bright. Go, let the turrets point ... West; let the centurions salute.

Arms Dealer enters and walks towards Fortinbras incredibly slowly. Black out.
End

Richard III, an Arab Tragedy

The play was commissioned by the Royal Shakespeare Company as part of the Complete Works Festival, 2007 and first performed at The Swan Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon on 8 February 2007.

Note on Text: *Unlike the other two texts in the Trilogy that were free adaptations of and improvisations on the original, composed in English; this version of Richard III was reworked directly in Arabic and is much closer to the original. What you read here is a translation of the Arabic performance text.*

Note on Costume: *The characters in their appearance need to resemble as closely as possible the entourage and ruling elites of the Gulf Arab states. State-specific and other local variants on this theme need to be resolved to avoid the costume citing any one particular state, unless this is the desired direction of the production. Buckingham and Mr Richmond should, however, be dressed in distinctly Western attire; suits and ties.*

The ruling brothers

Emir Gloucester – *Minister of Interior, then King*

Emir Clarence – *A religious man*

King Edward – *A profligate ruler*

The women

Margaret – *A dispossessed Queen*

Elizabeth – *A Queen, then a survivor*

Anne – *A victim, then a Queen*

Shore – *A palace courtesan*

The courtiers

Hastings – *An oligarch and Minister of State*

Lord Mayor – *An oligarch and Hastings' twin*

Buckingham – *A palace advisor and spy*

Rivers and Grey – *Elizabeth's cousins, soft-skinned Princes*

Stanley – *A noble soul*

Catesby – *An apparatchik*

Ratcliffe – *Catesby's nephew*

Young Prince Edward – *The legitimate Crown Prince*

A television presenter

The outsiders

Mr Richmond – *Diplomatic envoy of a foreign superpower*⁴⁶

Other characters

A woman, Um Khaled

A murderer

(The hum of central air-conditioning, the dry rattle of ducts, should accompany the internal scenes.)

⁴⁶ It is important that this actor speaks a different language to the others.

Prelude

*(Hanging above the stage an oversized portrait of a former Ruler, printed on cloth. Visible momentarily, as **Margaret** enters, the portrait collapses and **Margaret** retrieves it from the floor.)*

Margaret I am Margaret. You needn't be concerned about me; we lost. It is your right to ignore me. I would ignore myself if my history let me. I don't want your loans, your gifts, your reconstruction grants; I don't want your pity – we lost. All I ask from you is not to question my thirst for revenge. It's not because I'm Arab, I read history and see. In all events, my name is not Margaret but our history is so awful, even the victors have changed their names. *(Exit **Margaret** singing an old Syriac death song.)*

Article One

Scene One, the palace

Sounds of a raucous party in the background.

Richard *(Holding a pen and a paper file.)*
The earth has changed its skin,
the cold bite of metal given way to the lazy warmth of spring;
War's too fat for armour, too drunk to roar
War's a shaven testicle in Olga's scented paw.

Grizzly brother Akhwans⁴⁷ who waged the valiant fight
are clean-whiskered now, soft-skinned,
loose-jawed on Armani beds,
oiling whisper lusts with Snafi⁴⁸ screams.

Buckingham, seated in a surveillance room, taps the following message into an electronic device.

Dear R, Party again tonight, 3rd in three days. E. on drip by day, Viagra by night – not long now. Sound attached, Yours, B.

Richard But I, whose chest is weighed with a weather-proof heart,
Shorn of a mug to lock the lusty female eye;
I, born to the mother with the narrow pelvis,
spat into this world so beaten, buckled and battered that even
maids start at me.
No lover I; but plots I have laid
to set my brother Clarence and the King in deadly enmity. And if
King Edward be as true and just
as I am subtle and treacherous then Clarence will be imprisoned

⁴⁷ Akhwan– an Islamic religious militia which formed the main military force of the Arab ruler Ibn Saud.

⁴⁸ Snafi– a medication for erectile dysfunction.

because of a prophecy, which says that 'G'
 will be the murderer of Edward's heirs.
 If Generals can drive the world to war with Powerpoint,
 Cannot Richard reduce it to ashes with a few boxes of semtex
 and a gaggle of hooded pamphleteers?
 Dive, thoughts, into my files: here comes Clarence.

Enter Clarence, long-bearded, wearing the shortened garb of Islamic piety. He carries a file – his arrest warrant.

Good morning, brother. What does this file mean?

Clarence It's the warrant for my arrest.

Richard Why?

Clarence Because of my name.

Richard Your name?

Clarence See how far our brother has drifted into delirium and heresy. He plucked the letter 'Geem' from the consonants and claims that a witch prophesied that 'Geem' will disinherit his children. As my name begins with 'Geem', it follows in his thought that I am he.

Richard It's not the King that sends you to the Tower. This is the work of women! Your suffering is spawned in the Queen's head: Elizabeth! She sent the Minister of State to the basements and now she wants the King's brothers there too!

Clarence She rips and she sews.

Richard We are not safe Clarence, we are not safe.

Clarence We are not. Last night I dreamt we were fishing together in the Gulf, you stumbled and struck me overboard. Oh God! What pain it was to drown!

We hear an Arabian Gulf sea shanty, 'O ya maal'.

Richard And you a man of God.

Clarence Then I saw the figure of a child dabbled in blood. He cried out: 'Clarence is come. False Clarence – the coward that ran the knife between my child-thin ribs. Seize him Fires of Hell, make him taste the torment!'

Richard Say no calamity will strike us other than what has been decreed.

Clarence God alone can free me from torment.

Richard What about me?! I'll deliver you or take your place in that underground hell. Have patience.

Clarence It is God's will and there is none that can oppose Him.

Exit Clarence.

Richard *(To himself.)* Gods don't share designs with mules!

Enter Catesby and Hastings.

Hastings Good day to you, Emir!

Richard And to you, Minister. *(To Catesby.)* Catesby.

Catesby Morning, sir.

Richard A faithful lad that one; asked about you every day.

Hastings He's long been my boy.

Richard How did your Excellency brook imprisonment?

Hastings With patience, but I shall live to pay back my enemies.

Richard No doubt and so shall Clarence; your enemies are now his, too.

Hastings The head sleeps and the tails do wag.

Richard Mosquitoes in our lands become hawks!

Hastings Meat-eating rabbits!

Catesby For want of stallions, we saddle hounds.

Gloucester has taken Hastings' hand, conspiratorially. They whisper as Buckingham listens through headphones to their conversation.

Hastings There are many across the region who would dearly love to see the end of her.

Richard There are many at home.

Hastings The Generals—

Richard I know.

Hastings And if you were to put your hand in mine, Richard, we could—

They lean towards each other, whisper inaudibly, shake hands and break.

Hastings The King?

Richard Weak. His physicians fear his star is waning.

Hastings There is no power but Allah's. It's his hunger for women that has brought him to this – filthy!

Richard Very grievous.

Hastings It tires body and soul.

Catesby Not yours! I've got Shore lined up for you – she's worth three.

Hastings Shh! Is the King in his bed?

Richard He is. Go on and I'll follow.

Exit Hastings and Catesby, who is surreptitiously tipped by Richard.

Richard He cannot live but must not die till Clarence is sent to heaven. (*Hears Anne's lamentations, off.*) Ah! Lancaster's youngest daughter – well, why not? Granted, I killed her husband and his father. The readiest way to make the wench amends is to become her husband and her father; not for love but for a reason buried in Jacob's soul, which I must reach unto.

Scene Two, the mourning

Anne enters, dressed in black, followed by a score of females. A female azza (mourning ceremony) is established in which women offer condolences to the widow and mourn the bereaved communally. Disguised in black abbayas (veils), Richard and Catesby join the line of female mourners and sit beside Anne.

Anne May Allah's curses fall on the hand that punctured your flesh, on the heart that pierced your heart and the blood that spilt your blood. Should your murderer marry, may misery be his wife's lot. And if he should bring forth a child may it come to life twisted, premature and deformed.

Richard (*In a whisper.*) I'm so sorry.

Anne (*In a whisper.*) Devil! Trouble us not!

Richard Don't make a scene! Allow me, divine perfection of a woman, to acquit myself of slanders amassed around my name.

Anne Infection of a man, there is no slander, only fact! Fairer than tongue can name you—

Richard Fairer than tongue can name you—

Anne Fouler than heart can think you!

- Richard** I did not kill your husband.
- Anne** Oh! He's alive, then!
- Richard** No, he is dead.
- Anne** This former Ruler – did you not murder him?!
- Richard** I grant you.
- Anne** Grant me, dog! (*Publicly.*) O, He was gentle mild and virtuous!
- Richard** (*Publicly.*) So like the angels that have him now!
- Anne** (*In a whisper.*) He's in heaven, where you will never reach.
- Richard** (*In a whisper.*) Let him thank me, by our hand he enjoys the fruits of paradise.
- Anne** You are only fit for hell.
- Richard** I am fit for one place other.
- Anne** Some dungeon.
- Richard** Your bed! Your beauty was the cause of my crime; it haunted me in my sleep and led me to undertake the death of all the world to repose one little hour on your full breast. He that killed your husband did it to help you to a better husband.
- Anne** There is no better on this earth.
- Richard** He lives that wants you more than him.
- Anne** Where?
- Richard** Here! (**Richard** reveals himself. **Anne** spits in his face.)
- Richard** Rose water! Again.
- (*Pandemonium erupts in the mourning ceremony; Catesby wields a whipping cane to subdue the terrorized women.*)
- Anne** Your sight infects my eyes.
- Richard** Your eyes have bewitched mine. I am your slave. I worship you in my prayers and waking. (*Offering her his pistol.*) Take the gun – kill me. Death is sweet that comes from your hand. Don't hesitate; I did kill your father-in-law but your beauty provoked me to it. Kill me! I killed your young husband but your eyes forced me to it. (*Anne drops the pistol.*) Pick it up, or take my hand.

- Anne** Enough, hypocrite. I cannot kill you, though I want you dead.
- Richard** Tell me to kill myself and I'll do it.
- Anne** I did!
- Richard** In a fit of rage, speak it again.
- Anne** If I could only know your heart.
- Richard** It's drawn on my tongue.
- Anne** I fear both are false.
- Richard** Then no tongue on earth is true!
- Anne** Pick up your gun.
- Richard** Say your slave is forgiven.
- Anne** Not now.
- Richard** Have mercy, then, on your slave and wear this ring.
- Anne** *(Taking the ring.)* To take is not to give.
- Richard** Look how the ring encompasses your finger: even so your breast encloses my poor heart and both are yours.
- Richard** *draws her to him to kiss her, but their action is interrupted by the call to prayer.*
- Catesby** Prayer time, women – clear off!
- Catesby** *liberally distributes money to the women; some keep it, whilst others throw the money at Anne's feet, in disgust.*
- Richard** A parting word?
- Anne** Imagine it's been said.
- Exit Anne.*
- Richard** Was ever woman in this humour wooed? Was ever woman in this humour won?
By God, I've underestimated myself all these years.
This pert-bosomed beauty sees in me a clean-whiskered, soft-skinned lover.
I'll tint my hair with henna, douse kohl upon my eyes,
Summon an army of tailors to study my forms.

Shine out my sun, shine out.

Richard *exits, crooning a Khaleeji (Gulf Arab) love song.*

Scene Three, the palace

Rivers Have patience, madam; the King will recover his health!

Elizabeth What's my fate if he dies?

Rivers No worse fate than the loss of such a great man.

Elizabeth If the eye is blind, what's the good of light?

Rivers God has blessed you with a fine son to comfort you when he is gone.

Elizabeth The boy is young and his affairs are put into the hands of the Uncle, who loves neither me, nor any of you.

Grey Is it concluded?

Elizabeth Yes, Richard! Richard is the boy's legal guardian from the moment one of his doctors, advisors, brothers or any one of the thousand-headed staff spits poison into his gaping mouth!

Rivers and Grey May Allah give him long life.

All Amen.

Enter Buckingham and Stanley.

Buckingham Amen. Good day, your Majesty!

Elizabeth The King, Stanley?

Stanley Advisor Buckingham and I are just come from visiting him.

Elizabeth The King, Stanley!

Stanley Have faith, madam; the King's in excellent health.

Buckingham The King wants to re-knit the bonds of love between the Emir Richard and your brothers, your brothers and the Minister of the State Hastings – he's called a family meeting.

Elizabeth I fear what is hidden, not manifest. I fear our happiness is at its height.

Enter Gloucester, Hastings, followed by Catesby.

Richard They slander me – I will not suffer it!

Stanley Hastings, you're back!

Richard Who is it that insinuates to the King that I love them not? Is it because I cannot flatter and creep, smile, grease and pretend, nor duck with French courtesy?

Buckingham *Politesse oblige.*

Richard Because of this must I be held a rancorous enemy by the rabble scum of filth, liars and hypocrites?

Rivers To whom do you address your words?

Richard To you, rag of low birth! When have I offended you or any of your faction?

Elizabeth Brother Richard, you mistake the matter. The King sent for you and was not provoked by anyone else. He aims at your interior hatred against my kindred and myself.

Richard Who's to say? The world's grown so bad that sparrows are made to molest eagles.

Elizabeth You envy the advancement of my circle. May Allah grant we never have need of you!

Richard God grant me the same! You are the cause of my brother Clarence's imprisonment and other stains on the nobility—

Elizabeth I swear I never provoked his Majesty against Clarence; I'm his most earnest advocate.

Richard And do you deny that you were the cause of Hastings' imprisonment?

Rivers She may deny it, sir.

Richard She may, Master Rivers, she may do more; she may help you to many high advancements and then deny her hand therein—

Elizabeth I have too long borne your blunt upbraidings and bitter scoffs – the river has broken its banks! I shall acquaint his Majesty with the taunts I've endured.

Richard What! Threaten me with the King's rod, will you? Tell him; don't hide a hair! It's time to speak.

Before you were Queen, nay, before your husband was King, I was the motor in his machine, the sword of his will! I spilt my blood—

Rivers We all spilt our blood!

Hastings When?

- Rivers** When I brought you the Crown Prince!
- Hastings** Liar!
- Richard** During that time you and your late husband were sided with the tribe of Lancaster.
- Elizabeth** You are opening the seams of sedition!
- Hastings** Buckingham, open the archives!
- Richard** Let me remind you what you were and what you are: what I was and what I am.
- Rivers** In those turbulent times we followed our lawful King, as we would follow you, if you were our king.
- Richard** Your King? I'd rather be a peddler in the souk.
- Elizabeth** May Allah never show us that day.
- Richard** I'd rather be a refugee in Shatila!
- Elizabeth** May you drink from the bitter cup that I have drunk from!
- Enter Margaret, carrying a suitcase.*
- Margaret** Thieves! That fight over what you have pillaged from me! Though you do not kneel as my subjects because I'm no longer your Queen, yet fear runs in your veins because you know yourselves illegitimate!
- Richard** Foul, filthy witch, weren't you banished on pain of death?
- Margaret** Death is sweeter than to live a scabied camel in exile. (*To Richard.*) A husband and a son are debts around your neck; (*To Elizabeth.*) and a Kingdom around yours. My sorrows are yours and all your usurped pleasures are mine.
- Richard** This is my father's curse when you dabbed his brows in his son's innocent blood. God plague you.
- Elizabeth** Allah grants justice and does not forget.⁴⁹
- Hastings** To wrongdoers, wrong is done.
- Rivers** Allah will not forgive your sins.
- Margaret** You were snarling like wolves when I came and now you turn your hatreds

⁴⁹ Qur'anic exhortations.

on me? Can curses pierce the clouds and enter heaven? Then give way dull clouds to my quick curses! If not by war, then by excess die your King as ours by murder was removed to make him King! (*To Elizabeth.*) May thy son, the Crown Prince, die violently in his prime in payment for my son who was the Crown Prince,

And may this debt be ripped from your flesh,
 You who are the Queen for me who was the Queen.
 And may your life be longer than you can endure bewailing it
 and see another stand proud in your place as I see you now trembling in mine!
 Rivers and Hastings! You who stood by when my son was
 shredded into ribbons by knives;
 I pray Allah your lives be prematurely cut by the blade of your sins!

Richard She done, the hell hag?

Margaret Stay, dog! Listen to me, you promiscuous pig, you stain of Fate! You shame of your mother's womb! You loathed issue of your father's loins, you stained rag of honour, you foul, detested—

Richard Margaret.

Margaret Let me finish my curse!

Richard I did it for you; it ends in 'Margaret'.

The assembled laugh. Margaret, ridden by a spasm of rage, tries to attack Gloucester, but is prevented by the courtiers. She begins to moan.

Richard This is the djinn inside her: remove it! Beat her! The devil inside her is a horse! Catesby, ride the djinn!

The males beat Margaret with their Iqals.⁵⁰

Elizabeth Thus your curse returns against yourself.

Margaret Poor painted queen! (*She draws Gloucester to her and places her lips on his forehead.*) May each of you live as the subjects of his hate and he to yours: may this be Margaret's curse on you.

Exit Margaret.

Richard Can't blame her, she's had it hard and I repent of any hand I had in her suffering.

Elizabeth I swear I have always shown her due respect.

Richard Yes and Clarence had his share of your due respect, too. (*The Queen is ushered out by Rivers and Grey.*) Allah pardon them that are the cause of it! (**Hastings** and

⁵⁰ Iqal: a tightly woven black woollen head strap, worn by males in the Arabian Gulf.

Stanley *exit.*)

Catesby Allah pardon them ... (*Richard tips him.*) (*On mobile telephone.*)

Richard Hello my little man? The warrant yes, well done. Be sudden. Clarence speaks honey words, I fear they'll soften your heart. Your eyes drop stones. Go to it, son.

Buckingham, *seated in a surveillance room, taps the following message into an electronic device.*

Dear R, Hastings out in a puke green bisht. Margaret mad and prowling – no threat. Richard publicly accused Elizabeth of Clarence imprisonment. Sound attached, Yours, B.

Scene Four, the prison

Clarence *enters with a suitcase, identical to Margaret's. He opens it flat on the ground, and uses the water inside it to make ablutions in preparation for prayer.*

Clarence I swear there is no God but Allah. God forgive my sins. (*Enter Murderer.*) In God's name, what are you?

Murderer A man, as you are.

Clarence If you be hired for money go back again and I will send you to my brother, the Emir Richard. He shall reward you better for my life than the King does for news of my death.

Murderer You are deceived: he hates you.

Clarence Do not slander him. He is kind and merciful.

Murderer Merciful as rain on mud huts. He sent me to slaughter you. Pray now for you must die.

Clarence Dare you counsel me to pray to God yet would war with God by murdering me? He who kills without due reason, it is as though he kills the whole of humanity.⁵¹

Murderer Pray!

Clarence And do not shed blood that is sacred by Allah's law.⁵²

Murderer Pray!

Clarence Al Rawandi, in the sources says: 'beware of shedding innocent blood'—

⁵¹ Qur'an: Al Maidah, verse 32 (5:32).

⁵² Qur'an: Al 'Isra', verse 33 (17:33).

Murderer Pray! Pray!

The Murderer drowns him in the case of water. We hear an Arabian Gulf sea shanty, 'O ya maal'. Buckingham, seated in a surveillance room, taps the following message into an electronic device.

R.- Clarence removed from the game. Blow to moderate Islamic bla bla. No blowback anticipated. Yours, B.

Article Two

Scene One, the palace

King Edward Allah bless our deeds and grant our efforts success. Brothers; I want you to build on this bond of unity, to be like one hand, to be like the hunting dog that faithfully brings the prey to the master; to be like the palm: tall and strong.

The palm is blessed, it gives us dates and date juice which is a fine digestive but do not over-consume it, brothers, it ruins your teeth and will give you the shits. (*Elizabeth whispers to him.*) Yes, as the woman reminds me I want you to be like a majestic structure, each part sustaining the other! Brothers, my days are numbered.

All Allah give you long life!

King Edward I want you now to swear before me your allegiance to me in love and duty. (*To Rivers.*) You – the salty one – you start!

Rivers Swear? By God, I will! Hastings being my senior should, of course, swear first but he's just out of, well—

Hastings Where? Go on say it!

Grey I'll say it: prison!

A scuffle erupts between Hastings and Grey.

King Edward What is this chaos? 'Obeisance of your elders is like obeisance of God, if only man kneweth it is a great oath.' Thus said God! (*To Elizabeth.*) And you, woman! I don't exempt you from my warning! Nor your idiot nephew, nor this advisor. What's his name?

All Buckingham!

King Edward You were all factious and riddled with enmity until I united you!

Hastings I swear, your Majesty, to forget all our former hatreds.

Elizabeth So do I, Hastings, swear to bury old enmity.

Buckingham May Allah's curses fall on me if I carry towards you or your tribe any hatred.

King Edward Well done. Now let's have a photo. (*To Buckingham.*) You, the Frenchie! (*Enter Richard.*) Emir Richard, we have made peace of enmity and fair love of hate between these in-fighting brothers.

Richard A blessed labour, my King. Should anyone here by false intelligence hold me a foe, I desire to reconcile myself in peace. First, madam, I entreat true peace of you and will purchase it with my true services. Buckingham, if ever any grudge were lodged between us and you Rivers; indeed of you all. I do not know anyone in the Arab world with whom my soul is any jot at odds. Photo, Frenchie!!

Elizabeth I beseech your Majesty in this blessed hour to utter your pardon for our brother Clarence.

King Edward Dutiful wife!

Richard Have I offered my love to be so bouted in this royal presence? Who knows not that Clarence is dead? (*Throwing a file onto the floor.*)

Rivers Who knows not he is dead, who knows he is?

Elizabeth All-seeing heaven what a world is this!

Richard You mock his corpse, madam.

Kind Edward Is Clarence dead?

Richard Allah rest his soul.

King Edward My order was reversed.

Richard But he by your first order died. Allah's will and nothing can refute it. And it is Allah's will that others who deserve worse than he remain beyond suspicion.

Enter Stanley, flustered.

Stanley Your Majesty, I will not rise till you grant me my request!

King Edward Speak Stanley, what is it?

Stanley In a fit of drunkenness my Bangladeshi killed a driver and—

King Edward Shut up! It was a word from a broken, sapless King that killed my brother and now you want a word to pardon one of your servants? Which one of you spoke on Clarence's behalf? Which one of you reminded me of him! O God, I fear your vengeance will take hold of me. I don't want to see your faces. Hastings, take me away.

Exit all except Richard and Buckingham.

Richard This is the fruit of rashness! Did you mark how guilty pale the kindred of the Queen looked when they heard of Clarence's death? They forced the King to it. But Allah's hand is mighty and vengeful! The King is calling.

Buckingham I wait upon your grace.

Buckingham and Richard *exit together. Edward dies, reported visually through a tableau or by sound. We read the following message from Buckingham.*

R. Edward bye. Zero hour. Moved on Richard. Later, B.

Scene Two, the palace

Elizabeth Who shall hinder me to weep, to chide my fortune, and to myself become an enemy?

Grey From Allah we come and to Allah we return.

Elizabeth I want to make an act of tragic violence.

Grey There is no will than Allah's.

Elizabeth I'll join with black despair against my soul.

Rivers Be rational woman! Your young son is the Crown Prince, send for him forthwith to be crowned King.

Enter Richard and Buckingham.

Richard Sister, have comfort. All of us have cause to wail then death of our guiding star, but tears cannot cure catastrophes.

Buckingham May Allah accept our late King into His Mercy and welcome him into his wide heavens. In this difficult hour, I suggest we send a discreet escort to bring the Crown Prince here presently.

Rivers Why a discreet escort?

Buckingham For fear that a multitude would present too ready a target to enemies of the state, Clarence's disillusioned followers, or other factions that hide between us.

Richard I trust the King has made true peace with all of us – the pact is firm and true in me.

Rivers And in us all. Yet since the pact is so green, it should not be exposed to unnecessary duress. Therefore I say with Buckingham that it is right so few should escort the Prince.

Hastings And so say I.

Richard So be it. Madam, will you chair the meeting that decides the members of this royal escort?

Exit all but Buckingham and Richard.

Buckingham Whoever goes to collect the Prince, let's not be left behind and, on the way, I'll ensure the Queen's proud relatives are removed from the Crown Prince's orbit once and for all.

Richard My other self, my counsel, my oracle, my prophet! I call you 'cousin'; sweet cousin, I am led by you as a child is led by its mother. To the meeting!

Exit.

Scene Three, a street

Enter Catesby and Shore.

Catesby Your master Hastings is out of the clink today, sunshine, so you'll be taking him in hand tonight and I want all your lips and tricks busy restoring him to his former glory.

Shore I'm not one to disappoint.

Catesby Good girl.

Catesby receives a call on his mobile. Enter Um Khaled, distressed.

Um Khaled Um Ahmed? Um Ahmed?

Shore Morning Um Khaled.

Um Khaled Do you know anyone who knows anyone that knows the Emir Richard?

Shore Why? What is it?

Um Khaled My son. They've taken him.

Shore Yours too! Catesby! Her son, Khaled, they've taken him!

Catesby lifts up Um Khaled's veil to see her face and lowers his eyes to see her breasts.

Catesby *(To Um Khaled)* Your son, is it? Don't worry, dove, Catesby's your man. I'll take care of him. Come with us, now you're part of our little flock of woe!

Exit Catesby and Um Khaled and Shore.

Scene Four, York TV

News Reader The King's Diwan has formed a royal escort led by the Emir Richard and the Palace Advisor Buckingham, the Emirs Rivers and Grey to bring the Crown Prince to the capital where he will be crowned as ruler of the Kingdom.

Scene Five, the palace

Elizabeth, *holding small sea shells in her hand, from which she seeks to read prophecy.*
Enter Stanley.

Elizabeth Stanley? Come in!

Stanley I carry news that grieves me to unfold.

Elizabeth How is the Crown Prince?

Stanley Well and in health.

Elizabeth What's your news, then?

Stanley Your relatives, Rivers and Grey have been arrested.

Elizabeth Who by?

Stanley Richard and Buckingham.

Elizabeth On what charge?

Stanley The sum of all I can, I have disclosed.

Elizabeth I see the downfall of our house! The tiger now has seized the gentle hind. Welcome destruction, death and massacre! I see, as in a map, the end of all.

She throws the shells and exits. Stanley kneels to collect the shells and sees a terrifying vision.

Article Three

Scene One, the palace

Enter Prince Edward and Buckingham.

Buckingham Welcome Crown Prince to your palace.

Prince Edward Where's my mother?

Enter Richard.

Richard Welcome, my brother's son and my soul's passion.

Prince Edward Where's my mother?

Richard Somewhere, I'm sure.

Prince Edward My uncles would not have allowed this!

Richard The untainted virtue of your years has not yet dived into the world's deceit. Those uncles were obstacles in your path, their honey words hid the poison in their hearts. May God keep you from them and from such false friends!

Prince Edward God keep me from false friends, but they were none!

Enter Hastings and Catesby.

Richard Look! The Minister of State comes to greet you.

Hastings God bless you with happy days! (*Catesby leaps menacingly towards the Prince.*) Don't be afraid, cousin, it's Catesby; he wants to kiss your hand.

Prince Edward I thought my mother and my brother York would have met us on the way.

Hastings They've taken asylum in the American Embassy, for reasons only God knows!

Buckingham The shame of it! How indirect and peevish! Hastings will you persuade the Queen to send York unto his brother presently?

Hastings I've already sent my own brother, the Mayor. But the Ambassador sent him away, saying: 'You will not infringe the sanctity of the Embassy, even if you bring your entire army!'

Buckingham He is obstinate and backward and can't speak the language of the age!

Catesby 'Embassy sanctity' – eh? Bloody heretic! My Lord, let me take a bunch of my lads and we'll raid the Embassy!

Buckingham Political criminals who have tried to undermine national security seek the asylum offered by foreign embassies. The Prince has done no such thing. I've heard of men asylum seekers but never before of children. Therefore we break no law in removing him.

Richard Solution?

Catesby Raid the Embassy!

Hastings No! I'll see what I can do.

Prince Edward Quickly, Minister. (*Exit Hastings and Catesby.*) If York comes, where shall we reside till our coronation?

Richard I suggest your Highness repose at the Tower for your best health and recreation.

Prince Edward I don't like the Tower of any place. Counsellor Buckingham – did the British build that place?

Buckingham They laid its foundations.

Prince Edward They know how to play history, those British.
They showered these lands with seeds
Strewn from the whitest gloves,
Seeds that to this day, bear man-eating fruits.
The robes of Empire grown thin,
they settle today for the tidy plunder
of gun running and pesticides.
I'll tell you what, Buckingham.

Buckingham What, my lord?

Prince Edward If I live until I be a man, I'll win back our ancient rights in the Holy Lands, or die a soldier in the battlefield.

Richard A born ruler!

A celebratory sound clip from the Palestinian Liberation Organization archive is played.

Richard and Buckingham raise the boy onto their shoulders and exit with him, victoriously.

Scene Two, at the Foreign Embassy

Mr Richmond and Elizabeth are watching the National Television broadcast of the Crown Prince's arrival to the capital. The broadcast is live from the palace. Tchaikovsky's *The Nutcracker Suite* accompanies the transmission, in the way of commentary. On screen we see **Richard, Buckingham, Crown Prince Edward, Catesby** and armed members of the Royal National Guard.

Mr Richmond Please, Your Majesty, take a seat. We should be able to pick up their conversation in between this soup; can't bear Tchaikovsky myself – you?

Elizabeth Where are your men, Mr Richmond?

Mr Richmond That man in the suit there, he's one of them.

Elizabeth And the others?

Mr Richmond They'll be there, just not in frame.

Elizabeth How many are they?

Mr Richmond Three in total—

Elizabeth Three!

Mr Richmond Three of the best.

Elizabeth You've sent my boys to that animal—

Mr Richmond I assure you, your Majesty—

Elizabeth With three men!

Mr Richmond They're perfectly safe.

Elizabeth They are not perfectly safe. Stop saying they are perfectly safe.

Mr Richmond This is good, solid PR for all of you, your Highness – there's my Head of Security there – shows how the constitution is holding firm. Love the eagle on the Crown Prince's arm, very manly.

Elizabeth It's a falcon, not an eagle.

Mr Richmond Looks fabulous. The photographers are lapping it up.

On screen **Richard** gives the youngest Prince, York, a ceremonial knife.

Elizabeth What's he doing?

Mr Richmond They're exchanging gifts. It's perfect. Like I said, there's really no need to force a stand-off with Richard at this stage – not in your interests, not in ours, not in anyone's.

Elizabeth What's going on?

Mr Richmond *(To his technicians.)* Turn it up a little would you?

On screen Prince York, holding the ceremonial knife, jumps on **Richard**'s back. **Richard**'s guards start to unhinge the young Prince, meanwhile; the American guards get involved in the unhooking. A scuffle ensues at the end of which the three American guards are shot dead. The Princes are removed from camera frame; the broadcast stops abruptly and is replaced by a football match.

Elizabeth No!

Mr Richmond Ah. Oh, shit.

Elizabeth *(In Arabic.)* My children!

Exit Elizabeth. Enter Buckingham. Mr Richmond and Buckingham lock and tremble in a terrible embrace. Richmond exits.

Scene Three, the palace

Buckingham Catesby, you are deep and inward with our plans; tell me, is it an easy matter to make Hastings of our mind for the instalment of Richard on the throne?

Catesby Not easy. Hastings loves the Crown Prince for his father's sake. Not easy at all.

Buckingham And Stanley, what's his position?

Catesby Where Hastings pisses, Stanley pisses.

Buckingham Go to your master Hastings, then, Catesby and find out where he stands and summon him tomorrow to the palace to discuss the coronation. If you find him tractable to us, encourage him and show him all our reasons. If he be leaden, be so too and break off your talk. Give us notice of his inclination; tomorrow we hold *divided councils* and you shall be highly employed.

Enter Richard.

Richard Catesby! Commend me to the Minister of State. (**Gloucester** *hands Catesby a file.*) Tell him his ancient knot of dangerous adversaries tomorrow are let blood in the Main Square. Bid my friend for joy of this good news, give mistress Shore one gentle kiss the more.

Exit Catesby.

Buckingham What shall we do if we perceive Hastings will not yield to our complots?

Richard Prune his nut. And when I'm king claim of me the oilfields of the North. They will be yours in all their dust and rolling green.

Buckingham I'll claim that promise at your Grace's hands.

They shake hands. Enter Mr Richmond, stumbling, as if by mistake.

Mr Richmond Hello, sorry, I ...

Buckingham Mr Richmond: Mr Richard.

Mr Richmond Really? I had no idea! Oh, what an honour!

Richard Welcome. (*To Buckingham, who translates.*) Invite him for dinner that we may digest our plots in some form.

Buckingham He invites you to dinner.

Mr Richmond (*In Arabic.*) Shukran!

Richard *(In Mr Richmond's language.)* Ah, you speak Arabic, marvellous!

Exit Richard laughing, followed by Mr Richmond, delighted, and Buckingham, seething.

Scene Four, Hastings' chalet

Shore is dancing, half-dressed. Catesby is massaging Hastings' shoulders. Hastings emits little whoops of delight. Hastings' mobile phone rings.

Hastings Who is it?

Messenger A messenger from Stanley.

Hastings In the dead of night?

Messenger Nearly dawn, sir!

Hastings What is it?

Messenger My Lord says he dreamt of a wild dog's muzzle in your intestines, right? He says there are two councils being held tomorrow, right? Decisions taken at one might make you regret you attended the other, right? So he says come on, we're off north, right? To evade the danger what his soul divines, right?

Hastings Go back to Stanley and tell him he should fuck more often, right?

Messenger Right.

Hastings And if you call me again at this time of night, Catesby'll chew your balls off, right?

Messenger Right.

Catesby Message from Richard: your soft-skinned enemies, the Queen's relatives, Rivers and Grey, today in the Main Square – execution.

Hastings That's no sad news to me.

Catesby Richard wants to know if your hand is still in his?

Hastings Does he mean for the crown?

Catesby I think he does.

Hastings I'll see this crown of mine nipped from my shoulders before I see that crown on his head.

Catesby I live to see the day the crown sits on this pretty bud.

Hastings' *phone rings.*

Hastings Stanley! Frightened of the dog?!

Catesby *pays off Shore and she leaves.*

Stanley By God, I don't like these divided councils. And the dream I had makes things worse.

Hastings Stop worrying, you old maid. I know where I stand. We'll attend one of the councils, and our man Catesby will be in the other.

Stanley The Queen's cousins left the capital two days ago thinking their heads were secure and where are they now? In a basement awaiting the rope. *(Pause.)* We're going to the palace, then?

Hastings We are, we are, we are we are we are! *(Hangs up, then to Catesby.)* Give me some of your sweet stuff!

Catesby *whispers a vulgar joke to Hastings, they cackle loudly. Another phone call:*
Buckingham.

Buckingham Guffawing at dawn, Minister? Celebrating the news from the Main Square?

Hastings Are you going to the palace?

Buckingham Yes, but I'm back before you.

Hastings I think I'll stay for dinner there.

Buckingham And supper too.

Hastings Bon appetit!

Hastings and Catesby *exit singing.*

Scene Five, the Main Square

Rivers I, the Emir Rivers, say to you all: today you witness a subject die for truth, duty and loyalty.

Grey I, the Emir Grey say: God keep the Crown Prince from all the pack of you! A knot you are of damned bloodsuckers!

Catesby Filthy, dirty, soft-skinned, clean-whiskered fucks.

Rivers and Grey Allah is Great. Allah is Great. God save the Prince!

Catesby *executes them.*

Catesby *(On mobile phone.)* Hello, sir? Hastings said no ... That's all, sir. Anything else, sir? Done with them, sir. God keep you. *(Hangs up the call and spits.)* Bring the coffee, lad, get the cushions.

Ratcliffe Right you are, Uncle.

Scene Six, the palace

Seated on cushions, on the floor.

Hastings My lords, the cause why we are met is to determine of the coronation. In God's name, speak: when is the royal day?

Buckingham Are all things fitting for that royal time?

Stanley They are and it wants but nomination.

Catesby Tomorrow I judge a happy day.

Stanley Who knows the Protector's mind?

Catesby *(To Buckingham.)* We think you should soonest know his mind.

Buckingham Me? We know each other's faces, but for our hearts; he knows no more of mine than I of yours. Nor I no more of his, than you of mine; Hastings, you and he are near in love.

Hastings I thank his Grace but for his purpose in the coronation, I have not sounded him. But you may name the time and, on the Emir's behalf, I'll give my voice, which, I presume, he'll take in gentle part.

Enter Richard.

Catesby Upon your cue!

Richard My friends and cousins. Forgive my delay; I puffed up my pillows! I trust my absence neglects no great designs, which, by my presence, might have been concluded.

Buckingham Had not you come upon your cue, Minister Hastings had pronounced your voice for crowning of the King.

Richard He may! His Excellency knows me well, and loves me well.

Hastings I thank your Grace.

Richard Catesby, I saw good dates in the neighbouring chamber; golden tinted and excellent ripe, they drew my eye: fetch me some.

Catesby This very instant!

Exit Catesby. Ratcliffe pours coffee for Richard. Richard What's your name, boy?

Ratcliffe Ratcliffe.

Richard Who's your father?

Ratcliffe One of your followers and Catesby is my uncle.

Richard Good lad, stay close to me. Buckingham! *(Aside.)* Catesby's attempts have failed with the senile goat Hastings—

Buckingham I know, withdraw – I'll follow you.

Exit Buckingham and Richard. In the event the second council is shown in a visual tableau, Mr Richmond is to be present amongst the assembled.

Stanley Didn't you tell me Catesby was in the other meeting? Why is he fumbling in here with us?

Hastings First it's dreams, then it's why is he coming, why is he going? Relax, Stanley!

Enter Catesby.

Catesby Where is the Protector? I was sent for these dates.

Stanley Tomorrow is too soon. We need longer to make provisions for such an important day.

Hastings His Excellency looks cheerfully and smooth today. I think there's never a man I've met that can less hide his love or hate than he. You know his heart by one glance at his face.

Stanley What of his heart saw you in his face today?

Hastings That with no man here is he offended.

Stanley I pray God he be not.

Enter Richard and Buckingham.

Richard I invoke you all: tell me what they deserve that do conspire my death with devilish plots of damned witchcraft upon my body with their hellish charms?

Hastings The tender love I bear your Grace makes me most forward to doom the offenders. Whoever they are, they deserve death!

Richard Then be your eyes the witness of this ill. See how I am bewitched. My body is like a blasted sapling all withered up. This is Edward's wife that by her witchcraft has thus marked me, in league with that harlot strumpet ... Shore!

Hastings If they've done this thing ...

Richard If! Speak you to me of 'ifs'? You degenerate face-wipe! Traitor: off with his head! Catesby, you will do it! I swear I will not dine until I see that rotten, treacherous lump roll between my feet. The rest that love me rise and follow me. (*Gives Catesby a bag of money.*)

Exit all, except Catesby and Hastings.

Hastings (*To Catesby.*) What's your name, what's your father's name? Who are you? (*Patting the bag of money.*) Chopped tongues.

Catesby The Emir wants his lunch.

Catesby *seizes Hastings by the scruff of the neck and leads him off.*

Scene Seven, York TV

News Reader The Emir Gloucester and the Minister of State Hastings along with several leading cabinet members met today to finalize arrangements for the coronation of the Crown Prince. In an amusing aside, the Emir Gloucester commented on the improved quality of dates in the Royal Palace, saying such a sign boded well for the future of the state. More details to follow in our next bulletin.

Scene Eight, the palace

Richard Buckingham, tell me by God, how do we sink terror into their souls, prune as many heads as we need to, lock up the rest and make it all legit?

Buckingham You kidding? I can redraw the map of the globe with my finger; invade foreign lands with a flick of the wrist; flatten countries with the cock of a brow; I can make a mockery of the judiciary; thread an axis of evil through the eye of the press; turn a democracy into a tyranny and keep it all as clean and transparent as a Security Council resolution.

Richard I love you. But how?

Buckingham War on Terror!

A cabaret commences with a troupe of dancing girls dressed in military fatigues, armed with star-spangled umbrellas. A game of American football is played out with Hastings' head, whilst leaflets fall from above identifying Hastings as a threat to national security. Enter the Mayor.

Buckingham Honourable Mayor!

Richard Mortars!

Buckingham Car bombs!

Richard Catesby!

Buckingham Honourable Mayor, we sent for you—

Richard Duck!

All (*Singing.*)

*There are suicide ploys in those madrassa boys
And cells that cower in the palm of rush hour
There are enemies within, like parasites on skin
But all of the above have their luck running thin
'Cause they ain't got the wag of the dog ...
No, they ain't got the wag of the dog ...*

*There are bombs on the way and drones on display
Laws are being cooked, eyeballs unhooked
Bags are being filled, but nobody's been killed,
Just so we understand each other you and me, I mean, brother,
There's no ideological impurity in National Security,
I repeat, there is no impurity in National Security
They don't hit the screen – the mentally unclean –
So, let bags be filled, and the sweet earth tilled
You gotta get with the wag of the dog,
Yes, you gotta get with the wag of the dog!
(The cabaret ends as abruptly as it began.)*

Catesby (*Holding Hastings' head aloft.*) Here is the head of that ignoble terrorist Hastings.

Richard So dear I loved the man that I must weep.

Buckingham (*Addressing the Mayor.*) Can you imagine, your brother was the most deeply nested of terrorists who plotted to murder myself and the Emir in the council-house today?

Lord Mayor My brother?

Richard Think you we are non-believers, sir? Or that we'd proceed so rashly in this terrorist's death, but that the extreme peril of the case, the immediate danger to our lives and the manifest threat to the supreme national interests, forced us to it?

Lord Mayor Bless your hands and your swords! May God reward you for warning false traitors from like attempts!

Richard We didn't want him dead before you heard the traitor speak and timorously confess the manner and the purpose of his treason: that you might signify the same to the citizens.

Lord Mayor I have no need to hear sounds from the mouth of a traitor! Your testimony, your Excellency, will more than suffice. Fear not, I'll acquaint our citizens with all your just proceedings in the name of National Security.

Buckingham You be the witness to our intentions.

Richard Catesby, dues. (*Catesby hands Hastings' severed head to the Mayor. Then, tearfully.*) Our deepest condolences.

Mayor *exits.*

Richard (*To Buckingham.*) He goes towards the Main Square. Follow him and infer the bastardy of Edward's children to the people there.

Buckingham We can't hound them through the streets, cousin; we'll go to their homes, to their beds and breakfast tables. Bring the television studio here!

Richard Brilliant!

Buckingham (*To Catesby.*) Fetch back the Mayor, Catesby; you can play the mullah. Cousin Richard, you are distressed, you are no longer of nor for this world: take this Qur'an in your hand, look morose, deepen your voice, play with these beads and around you we'll build a very holy discourse. Catesby will lead the religious charge, you rebut with counter-arguments. But be not easily won to our request. Play the virgin's part. Plead no and take it.

A makeshift TV studio is erected, the bewildered Mayor is brought back in.

News Reader Good evening viewers and welcome to tonight's episode of *Talk of the Nation*, in which we discuss the growing power vacuum that has crippled state institutions. We welcome his Excellency the Emir Richard and Mr Catesby.

Catesby Shaikh Catesby.

News Reader I do beg your pardon, Shaikh Catesby.

Catesby Your Excellency, we ask you about your refusal to accept the reins of power and this, in reality, is the question of your troubled people.

Richard In the name of Allah the Merciful, the Bounteous and peace onto the Sire of Messengers our Prophet and adored Muhammad (Peace be upon Him). The royal tree has left us royal fruit, which will no doubt make us happy by his reign. So I don't understand your question. As for me, as you see, I am devoted to worship and reflection upon Divinity and thanks be to God.

Catesby You refer to the sons of Edward, but as the nation will read tomorrow in the national press the DNA of these children bears no resemblance to the DNA of their

father.

Richard Our constitution is clear and DNA is a vice.

Catesby But the tests were conducted overseas!

Richard Overseas is a doorway to the devil.

Catesby Your people are begging you and have no hope other than you.

Richard Leave me in peace and find someone else. It is better for you that I am a minister working for you than a ruler over you.

Lord Mayor Let me remind you of the holy saying: *'If you see wrong, it is your duty to correct it!'*

All Agreed upon by all sources.

Lord Mayor The Prophet (Peace be upon Him) sayeth: *'If the power to govern the nation is given wrongly, then await the final hour.'*

Richard Let the final hour toll, it is a duty upon us all.

Catesby Quiet, please, we have a call. (*Putting his hand to his earpiece.*) 'Hello? Oh, welcome. (*Laughs.*) Oh, yes, yes, I see, I do agree, oh yes, thank you, thank you, thank you so much. Bye bye!' (*To Richard.*) That was the Secretary General of the Arab League!!! He begs you to accept in the interests of regional security.

Richard Let the Secretary General of the Arab League call, my mind is made up.

Catesby Wait, wait we have another caller, it's from very far away. (*Catesby speaks a broken English.*) 'Hello. Yes please. Yes please. Thanks, thanks a lot. Bye bye.' That was the Secretary General of the UN!

Richard The UN has no business interfering with our internal affairs.

Catesby Fine, okay, but let us look at the results of our nationwide opinion poll conducted on the internet which shows: oh, well, oh, my ... God be praised!! Ninety-nine per cent of the citizens have requested you to become our ruler, meanwhile ... one per cent have no access to the internet.

Lord Mayor Or their dial-up cards have run out?

Richard If one day a people desires to live, then Fate must answer their call.⁵³

Catesby So you accept?

Richard When do I get crowned?

⁵³ Abul Qassim Al-Shabi, Tunisian poet.

Catesby Tomorrow.

Richard As you will. Allah bless you all.

News Reader That was the end of our historic episode and we bid you, dear viewers, farewell until we meet again.

They are off air.

Buckingham I salute you: long live King Richard.

Richard (*Lifting the chair he was seated in.*) I'll keep this chair as a memento of this occasion.

They exit cackling.

*Article Four*⁵⁴

Scene One, outside the palace

Anne Good morning, sister.

Elizabeth I see we share the same longing to visit the Princes?

Anne Their aunt I am in law, in love their mother.

Elizabeth Kind sister, we'll enter all together.

Ratcliffe I may not suffer you to visit the Princes; the King has charged the contrary.

Elizabeth Who is the King? Who?!

Ratcliffe I meant their Protector.

Elizabeth May God not leave him a head to be crowned.

Anne (*To Ratcliffe.*) You are addressing the Queen, their mother, who desires to see her children.

Ratcliffe I am bound by oath, and therefore pardon me.

Anne May Allah's curse fall on you and him!

⁵⁴ Act Four is supremely ritualistic in which the threads of linear, causal time and cyclical, ahistorical time are interwoven and meshed. This contrast in temporality is accentuated by the alternating female–male structure of the scenes. To render these ideas tangible, the act is approached essentially through music that draws on the traditions of song, ceremonial dance and witchcraft in the Arabian Gulf to create a swelling, cascading, hallucinatory series of musical and visual tableaux.

Enter Stanley.

Stanley (To Anne.) Madam, please accompany me.

Anne Where to?

Stanley Your husband's coronation requires that you be present in the female viewing chamber.

The sound of the percussions from the coronation ceremony builds.

Elizabeth Cut my dress open that this heart may have some scope to beat, or else I collapse with this dead-killing news!

Anne The flood starts with a drop.

Stanley Come, madam, come; I was sent in haste.

Elizabeth Go, go, Anne, I envy not thy glory; may God protect you from all harm.

Anne Why? When he that is now called my husband came to me, I wept my then-husband's corpse. When I looked into his face, I said to him: 'May you be cursed, for evicting me from the train of my life! And, when you marry, let sorrow haunt your bed; and may your wife – that poor blighted soul – be made to drink the misery I drank from your hand that placed the stone of death on my husband!' Before I could repeat this curse again, my woman's heart grossly grew captive to his honey words. Now my own soul's curse returns to my chest. He hates me and will be rid of me sooner not later.

Exit Stanley and Anne.

Elizabeth Stay! Look back with me at the Tower. Oh, mute stones! Blind witnesses to our pain. I beg you give solace to my boys! Comfort the horror of their nights and the loneliness of their days, be gentle you inhuman womb. What have you left in me my pain, a mother's incinerated heart wailing at stones!

Scene Two, the palace

The coronation ceremony takes the form of an ancient war dance, 'Al Ardha'⁵⁵ performed by males in chorus with swords and rifles. Richard stands in line with the dancers and performs the repetitive movements with them, raising and lowering swords and rifles in time with the drums and the chant. The child Prince Edward is downstage of the chorus, as if sleepwalking. Richard breaks from the chorus and removes the Iqal from the child's head and places it on his own, then uses the child's headscarf to blindfold his eyes. We are entering hallucinatory time.

Richard My cousin Buckingham!

⁵⁵ Al Ardha: a war dance performed predominantly by tribes in the Najd region of the Arabian peninsula. The dance is thought to have pre-Islamic origins; consisting of a chorus of dancers and singers and lines of percussion players, its contemporary use is restricted primarily to celebrations and festivals.

Buckingham My gracious Ruler?

Richard Shall we wear these honours for a day; or shall they last, and we rejoice in them?

Buckingham Forever may they last!

Richard Buckingham, now I'll know if you are current gold indeed! Young Edward lives: think now what I would say?

Buckingham Say on, my lord.

Richard I say I would be king.

Buckingham So you are.

Richard Am I king? It is so, but Edward lives.

Buckingham True, noble Prince.

Richard Bitter consequence, that Edward still should live: 'True, noble Prince!' You're so dull. Shall I be plain? I wish the bastards dead! What do you say? Speak suddenly and be brief.

Buckingham You may do as you please.

Richard You're all ice! Do I have your consent that they shall die?

Buckingham I will resolve your grace immediately.

Buckingham *exits from the stage and enters his surveillance room, where Mr Richmond awaits him. They consult. The dance continues.*

Richard Catesby!

Catesby Order me!

Richard Don't you know anyone whom corrupting gold would tempt unto a close exploit of death?

Catesby I know a man whose humble means match not his haughty mind.

Richard What is his name?

Catesby Tyrrel.

Richard I partly know the man. Go, call him hither. (*Exit Catesby.*) The deep revolving Buckingham no more shall be my counsellor – stops he now for breath? What news with you, Stanley?

Stanley My cousin Dorset's fled to join with the foreigners.

Richard Inform Anne to prepare my chamber, I will take a second wife! Why do you gape, moron?

Exit Stanley. Enter Catesby.

Catesby I couldn't find Tyrrel.

Richard Then?

Catesby I will play his part.

Richard Do you dare?

Catesby Prove me.

Richard Kill a friend of mine?

Catesby I'd rather kill two enemies.

Richard Quick-witted Catesby! Two deep enemies: I mean those bastards in the Tower.

Catesby Let me have open means to come to them, and I'll rid you from the fear of them.

Richard Say it is done, and I will prefer you.

Catesby It's done, my Emir.

Enter Buckingham.

Buckingham I have considered your late demand.

Richard Dorset is fled to the foreigners.

Buckingham I hear that news. I claim my due by promise. The oilfields of the North, which you promised, I should possess.

Richard As I remember the late ruler did prophesy that foreign armies would rule this land!

Buckingham Your promise.

Richard Foreigners!

Buckingham My Lord!

Richard Do you not learn Arabic poetry, Buckingham?

Buckingham Your promise of the oilfields.

Richard ‘And teach him how to bow the arrow every day and when his arm was strong...’ Finish the verse! Go on.

Buckingham What?

Richard ‘He shot me’ – you bastard! Try another one, Counsellor: ‘If you be not a hungry wolf, full of menace ...’ What’s the end of that line, my advisor, remind me?

Buckingham I don’t follow.

Richard ‘The foxes will piss on you!’ Do you want to make me weep, Buckingham; why don’t you learn poetry?

Buckingham Do you keep your promise or no?

Richard God protect me from my friends – as for mine enemies, I am apt enough.

Exit Richard.

Buckingham Death for a man like me in a country like this carries no notes, no pertinent documents, no yea or nay votes. It’s like the turnaround of a mildly soiled room in a well-run hotel. Turn, head, go find a door, walk through it.

Exit Buckingham.

Scene Three, the palace

Catesby with blood on his hands and robes.

Catesby I swear I turned back twice. But He put out his hand. The Book was on the pillow. ‘No!’ I said, ‘it’s the Qur’an. It’s haram. Can’t do it. Haram.’ Then one of them opened his eyes: a boy. Same age as my own. Can’t do it. Can’t. God, what did you make me of? Yesterday, I snapped my friend’s neck and today these children. Filthy, dirty scab; rotten, useless chump! It wasn’t me: it was the devil, the devil put out his hand.

(Sings.)

Damn you and damn all who begged for your love.

Damn all the lovers who seek only pain!

My crime in this life was to clear room for you in my heart

To love you is to slash open my veins.⁵⁶

Scene Four, the palace

⁵⁶ An Iraqi folk song.

The women are assembled in mourning black. They are engaged in a Khammari dance.⁵⁷ The words are spoken in the style of recitativo.

Elizabeth Ah, my young Princes!
Ah, my tender babies!
God slept when this was done and died when it happened.

Margaret Now prosperity begins to mellow and drop into the rotten mouth of death.
Here in these confines slyly have I lurked, to watch the waning of mine adversaries.

Elizabeth Oh blood-soaked earth!
Open your jaws, I will bury my live bones in you.

Margaret Tell over your woes again by viewing mine.

Elizabeth Fate's widow, triumph not in my woes.

Margaret I told you then.

Elizabeth Don't remind me.

Margaret I called you then poor, painted Queen.

Margaret beats Elizabeth with an Iqal.

Where is your husband?
Your brothers?
Your children?
Gnash from the fat of your heart, gnash!
I am thirsty for revenge!

Elizabeth God be my witness, I wept for your sorrows!

Margaret Coo in your catastrophe, coo like an errant dove! You did usurp my place,
and now you usurp the just proportion of my sorrow.

Elizabeth Teach me how to curse and melt the human frame, teach me!

Margaret Forbear to sleep the nights, and fast the days; compare dead happiness with
living woe.

Elizabeth My words are dull.

Margaret Thy woes will make them sharp, and pierce like mine.

Scene Five, the military parade

⁵⁷ Khammari dance, traditional dance for one female dancer, practised in the northern Gulf region, Kuwait.

Richard *is waving from a balcony at the passing military cavalcades. We hear the sound of military brass bands and crowds cheering.* **Elizabeth** *is brought to stand next to him.*

Elizabeth Villain slave, where are my children?

King Richard Sister, I must speak a word with you. You have a daughter with a fine mouth.

Elizabeth Let her live and I'll corrupt her manners, stain her beauty.

King Richard Wrong not her birth, she is of royal blood.

Elizabeth To save her life, I'll say she is not.

King Richard Know that from my soul I love thy daughter, and mean to make her queen of the Peninsula.

Elizabeth Who do you mean shall be her King?

King Richard Who else but the King in all his blood and guts.

Elizabeth You?

King Richard I.

Elizabeth God save us!

King Richard What say you, then, mother; you are best acquainted with her humour.

Elizabeth Send her a pair of bleeding hearts; engrave her brothers' names on them, then watch how happily she weeps.

King Richard What's done is dead. If fate did steal the kingdom from your sons, to make amends, I'll give it to your daughter.

And in this we make a lie of destiny. Go then, my mother, to thy daughter; acquaint the princess with the sweet hours of marriage joy, the taste of man.

Elizabeth What man? Her father's brother?

King Richard Say that the King, which may command, entreats.

Elizabeth That which the King's king forbids?

King Richard She will be a high and mighty queen.

Elizabeth To wail the tide, as her mother does.

King Richard Your reasons are too shallow and too quick.

Elizabeth They are too deep and dead as my infants in their grave.

King Richard By my religion and my crown.

Elizabeth You have profaned the first and usurped the second.

King Richard I swear—

Elizabeth Swear by something that you have not wronged.

King Richard By the world.

Elizabeth It's full of your foul wrongs.

King Richard My father's soul.

Elizabeth Your life dishonours it.

King Richard By God.

Elizabeth God's wrong is most of all. What can you swear by now?

King Richard The time to come.

Elizabeth Your past wrongs extend to your grave. **Richard** *leaves the balcony and thrusts Elizabeth into a private space.*

King Richard I swear you are an atheist!

Enter Catesby with a branding iron.

Elizabeth Take me. I'll marry you, I'll give you children.

King Richard What I seek runs in her veins.

Elizabeth Shall I be tempted by the devil?

King Richard If the devil tempt you to do good.

Elizabeth You killed my children.

King Richard But in your daughter's womb I bury them. Where in that nest of spicery they shall breed selves of themselves, to your recomforture.

Elizabeth Shall I go win my daughter to thy will?

King Richard And be a happy mother by the deed.

Elizabeth You shall understand from me her mind. *Exit Elizabeth.*

King Richard A kiss of my true love.

The sound of the military band continues.

Scene Six, the war room

Richard What news, Stanley?

Stanley Western armies are on the seas.

Richard Let them sink.

Stanley Stirred up by Dorset, Buckingham and Morton they make for our lands, to claim your crown.

Richard Is the chair empty? Is the sword unswayed? Is the King dead? The empire unpossessed? Why aren't you with them? Follow the foreign filth, sell your country?

Stanley I never was, nor never will be false.

Richard What did you name your son, Stanley?

Stanley George Stanley.

Richard Is that an Arabic name?

Ratcliffe No, by God!

Stanley What do you mean?

Richard You are a traitor! Dispatch now and muster men and arms.

Stanley Immediately.

Richard Your son George Stanley remains as my guest. Be loyal to me or else his head falls like a head of corn.

Stanley So deal with him as I prove true to you.

News Reader Edward Courtney and his brother there are in arms in Dinevshire.

Richard Devonshire!

News Reader My liege, the Golfbags are in arms.

Richard Guildfords!

News Reader By the hour, more traitor rebels join them. The foreigners have sent infantry to Buckingham the traitor!

Richard Only songs of death! Take that (*Slaps him.*) that you may bring me better news.

News Reader It is so, my Lord.

Richard Tell me, then!

News Reader Sand storms have dispersed Buckingham's forces, he is lost and does not know where he wanders.

Richard Has a bounty been announced for that traitor-dog, Buckingham?

Ratcliffe It has.

Richard Onwards, then, since Allah has sent nature's wrath and dispersed the invaders let us move on. If not to destroy the invaders, then to squash the heretic-kafirs inside this land!

Richard *places Ratcliffe and the News Reader on either side of him. He extends his hands and they sheepishly join hands with him. The three men charge off, screaming.*

Scene Seven, the palace

Dialogue is suppressed, furtive. In the distance we hear fighter jets and bombs falling.

Richard *sits in Buckingham's surveillance booth, monitoring the conversation.*

Stanley I have been sent to discuss with you preparations and protocol for your daughter's wedding to the King.

Elizabeth The Night of Penetration.

Stanley Yes.

Elizabeth Excellent, my daughter is ready.

Stanley When will the guests arrive?

Elizabeth At 20:00 hours sharp on the agreed date.

Stanley Which entrances?

Elizabeth The Northern and Eastern Gates for those arriving by sea and private plane, well-wishers arriving on foot can use the Southern Gates.

Stanley Staggered arrival?

- Elizabeth** What on earth for? All together, my dear, I trust we have enough cutlery.
- Stanley** You know I won't be able to attend.
- Elizabeth** Why not?
- Stanley** My son is guest of honour in the King's basement. It would be inappropriate of me to be seen at parties at a time like this.
- Elizabeth** But you will uphold my daughter's honour, Stanley?
- Stanley** With all I possess.
- Elizabeth** To be free of the devil, we must give ourselves to the devil, Stanley.
- Stanley** I know. May God ease our task.

Article Five

Scene One, York TV

- Buckingham** Will not King Richard let me speak with him?
- Catesby** Not until you've made your vile confession.
- Buckingham** (*Reading a statement.*) I am Buckingham. I was the advisor to the palace. I am an agent of foreign imperial agencies. I spied on this country's most sensitive interests. And transmitted this information to my masters in order to weaken the state and engineer its downfall. I am a secret employee of the Mossad- CIA. I single-handedly orchestrated the death of the Crown Prince and his brother to weaken the position of the King. To all these things I confess and beg forgiveness from God and King Richard.
- Catesby** May Allah bless him with long life!

They put a plastic bag on his head and asphyxiate him.

Scene Two, four images and a song

Ratcliffe leads **Anne** across the stage. *It is understood from the crossing that she is to be stoned to death.*

Catesby, who will oversee the stoning, sings a love song: 'Ya naas dallouni'.

In the background, Mr Richmond and an unidentified man are exchanging documents, maps, schedules.

Elizabeth looks through a pair of binoculars handed to her by **Richmond**.

Scene Three, the battleground, a dreamscape

Catesby *(Intoning a prayer.)* Forgive my deepest, blackest sins,
my crimes, my soul this night is heavy, my life in your hands ...

Ratcliffe *brings Catesby tea, then falls asleep.*

Richard *(On the phone in Buckingham's surveillance suite.)* Will the Ambassador not speak to me? I have a conscience that wants to talk to him about the consequences of being an enlightened man of learning! Where can I take this stray dog of mine? Where to kennel it? If my dog bites you, Ambassador, it will infect you and your frail masters – filth in: filth out! My hands are covered in it, but I don't boast otherwise you two-faced democrat dog! Now be careful what you say, Ambassador, you're in my country. Oh really? Well, I have snipers in The Hague too!

Enter Margaret singing an old Syriac death song, pulling a horse. Behind her, the ghosts of Clarence, Anne, Hastings, Rivers, Grey. Behind them, Mr Richmond.

Mr Richmond *(Holding a Qur'an in his hand.)*

God and our good cause fight upon our side;
For what is he they follow? Truly, citizens,
A bloody tyrant and a homicide;
One that hath ever been God's enemy:
Then, if you fight against God's enemy,
God will in justice ward you as his soldiers;
I read it all right here in your Qur'an
Allah says: 'whoever defends himself
From being oppressed can not be blamed';
Chapter Forty Two, Verse Forty One
As-Shura, which means the Consultation
And that is what I'm saying to you all.
Then, in the name of God and all these rights,
Advance your standards, draw your willing arms.

Scene Four, the mounting of Al-Ummah

Richard What can I say more than I have said? Who you face today are a gang of heretics, refugees from the face of justice and the ire of Allah! Foreigners, invaders, jailbirds and shantytown dwellers whose poverty has spewed them forth to die at your hands. They are envious-eyed with no honour in their souls.

They saw you possessing oil and blessed with astonishing wives and they would restrain the one and disdain the other. And who leads them but a paltry heathen? A murtad⁵⁸ and a sproglet of Sykes-Picot. A grand conspirator who holds the Bible in one hand and buries the Torah in his heart, who wishes to turn you into a nation of castrati. If we be conquered, let

⁵⁸ Murtad: rejecter of the Islamic faith.

men conquer us, not these bastard heathens who hold life dear and swill in its iniquities and vice as animals, exactly as animals! Down with the enmity of the enemy! May the losers lose!⁵⁹ (*To Catesby.*) Will Stanley bring his men?

Catesby No.

Richard Off with his son's head!

Catesby The enemy is at the gates; we don't have time.

Richard What's this horse called?

Catesby Al-Ummah.⁶⁰

Richard Al-Ummah! Let me ride Al-Ummah! (*He unsheathes his sword.*) This, my Qadisiya!⁶¹ This, my Battle of Thiqar!⁶² On them! Victory sits on our helms.

Margaret *turns the horse, rotating it furiously like a mechanical bronco in a Las Vegas bar.*

Richard A horse! A horse! My kingdom for a horse!

The sound of two clean sniper shots, then silence.

Scene Five, the aftermath. Waves

Enter Stanley, Elizabeth, then Mr Richmond. Elizabeth translates between Stanley and Mr Richmond.

Mr Richmond God and your arms be praised, victorious friends, The day is ours, the bloody dog is dead.

Stanley He is, my lord.

Mr Richmond Good man! What men of name are slain on either side?

Stanley Many, many. (*Stanley reads from a scroll.*)
Hamza Bin Abd Al Mutalib
Abu Thar Al Ghufarri
Summayah bint Khayyatt
Al Husein Bin Ali

⁵⁹ The expression is Qur'anic, but notorious for its use by the late Iraqi tyrant Saddam Hussein in his speech marking the eleventh anniversary of the end of the Iran–Iraq war, 1999.

⁶⁰ Al-Ummah, Arabic for the Nation of Believers.

⁶¹ Qadisiya, decisive engagement between the Arab Muslim armies and the Sassanid Persian army which gave the Arab Muslims the conquest of Persia.

⁶² Thiqar, a pre-Islamic battle between Arab tribesmen and a Sassanid Persian army.
Ask him about his son – he alive?

Al Hassan Al Basri.

Mr Richmond Inter their bodies as becomes their births:
Proclaim a pardon to the soldiers fled
That, in submission, will return to us:
What traitor hears me, and says not Amen?

Stanley's list of martyrs and Mr Richmond's speech, run simultaneously.

Stanley:

Wafaa Al Amer
Shafiq Al Athem
Mahdi Ben Barakah
Muhammad Abdu
Abdullah Ibn Al Muqaffah
Omar Al Mukhtar
Faraj Foudah
Hussain Mroue
Kamal Naser
Sami Taha
Ahmed Orabi
Khalil Hawi
Samir Qaseer Abdulrahman Al Kawakebi
Mohammad Mossadegh
Yusuf Al Athamah

Mr Richmond:

This land hath long been mad, and scarr'd herself;
The brother blindly shed the brother's blood,
The father rashly slaughter'd his own son, The son, compell'd, been butcher to the sire:
Alright, now: into Elizabeth's hands I place the reins of interim governance As mild
precursor to free elections
Peace, prosperity and smiling plenty: Abate the edge of traitors, yes please God, Save us
from the scourge of insurgency That would splint the broken arm of terror, And make this
dry land weep in streams of blood!
God say amen! Terror God Amen. Terror God Amen.

Beneath these words, a Jihadi song builds in the background until it is intolerably loud.

A figure with masked face (*Loading and firing a rocket- propelled grenade.*) Allah-U-Akbar!

End

The Speaker's Progress: A play in the shadow of revolution

The Envoys:

Speaker
 Representative of the Writers' Union
 Representative of the National Tourist Board
 Representative of the Council of Virtue
 Representative of the Women's League
 Representative of the Student Union
 Former Actress Young Woman
 An Actress from the Golden Era
 A sound technician, later a Musician

Characters in the Reconstructed play⁶³

The Ruler – *a man in love – performed by the Representative of the Council of Virtue*
 Thuraya – *a woman in search of freedom – performed by the Representative of the Women's League*
 Nishami – *her housemaid – performed by the Young Woman*
 Tagtiga – *her drunken uncle – performed by the Representative of the Writers' Union*
 Faris – *his rich friend – performed by the Representative of the National Student Union*
 Mullah Farhan – *a reactionary – performed by the Representative of the Council of Virtue*
 Feylouti – *a blind fool – performed by the Representative of the Council of Virtue*
 Fawz – *a female outsider – performed by the Former Actress*
 A Sea Captain; Courtiers – *seen on the archive footage only*

Act One, the Discourses

Scene One

As the audience enters the theatre, archive film is projected onto the projection screen, showing the audience awaiting the start of the performance in 1963. Enter Sound Technician. He prepares reels, puts on his headphones, nods to the Speaker, who enters with a folder and stands at the podium.

Speaker *(In Arabic.)* Peace be upon you, good evening and welcome. In light of the relations that link our two sovereign nations in friendship and trust and out of respect for our hosts, I will be addressing tonight's lecture in your language.

(In the language of the host venue.) **Good evening and welcome. As some of you may know I used to be a theatre maker. But, for several years now – since the closures – I, and others like me, have been in forced retirement. Theatres and other public venues have been closed. The act of performance itself has been criminalized as part of a series of pre-emptive measures including the establishment of emergency law, nocturnal curfews, military courts and the suspension of the internet to guard against the**

⁶³ The play that forms the object of the reconstruction is a fictional 1963 Gulf Arab adaptation of Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*. The main characters and storyline of Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* are identifiable in this adaptation. For reference, as follows: The Ruler – Orsino; Thuraya – Olivia; Nishami – Mariah; Tagtiga – Toby Belch; Faris – Andrew Aguecheek; Mullah Farhan – Malvolio; Feylouti – Feste; Fawz – Viola.

undermining of national unity and halt the spread of the mental plague and associated civil unrest that has gripped so much of our region in recent times.

Let me be definitive: I support these actions. Indeed, during the Artists' Trials, I made my position clear by giving a detailed public denouncement of all of my previous work. I even offered to set fire to a theatre.

I would happily be in my country now, defending our right to self- definition, but we have been terribly wronged and viciously misunderstood; therefore, to address these misconceptions our leaders have seen it fit for us to be here, with you, tonight. Though we no longer have need of theatre as a form of enquiry or representation, we understand your attachment to this outdated medium and will therefore meet you halfway, as it were, embodying our discourse in a language that you will recognize and understand, whilst respecting the regulations that now govern our cultural expression.

Before we go any further, allow me to take you back in time to a period when revolution and, for that matter, theatre were all the rage. This is not the first time our region has witnessed the tumult of revolution: 50 years ago, it was swimming in it.

On the projection screen, book covers from the early 1960s are displayed: A Guide to Arab Revolution; The Arab Revolution.

Alongside tracts like these, were plays that tried in their own way to stir up trouble in our stable lands.

Here, *(Displaying the archive tapes.)* are the reels of one such performance, extracts from which will serve as an example of past mistakes, and proof of the corruptive, insidious and illusory nature of false freedom. Lights down: we'll begin.

The archive recording plays on the projection screen. We see the stage curtain opening to reveal the Ruler and his court, with musicians. Here follows the text of the archive recording:

Ruler *(Addressing the musicians.) Do you know what love does to a man's breathing? To his lungs, to his eyes, to his dreams! You do not! You play false and your eyes wander. I think I'll fold you all into a fish trap and give you a straw to breathe from.*

Servant *Shall we prepare the fish trap, Shaikh?*

Ruler *What trap, what fish? When I am the one ensnared and bound, clawed and mauled, when my soul is hanging like ripped meat from the beak of a predator named Thuraya! Music is the food of love and love is the blood of freedom and freedom is the mother of progress (The audience erupts in spontaneous applause.) and she this woman, Thuraya, is the heart of progress. (Addressing the Minister.) Cousin, you will announce a prize for the greatest love song of all time. The winner will receive the equivalent of 40 days' worth of this country's oil wealth; one for each day of Thuraya's mourning.*

Minister *That's 10 per cent of the national income!*

Ruler *Not from the state coffers, you criminal – from my own wealth.*

Minister *But, cousin—*

Ruler *Scatter my messengers, burn my palaces, but never can you extinguish the flames in this heart! I want to churn the sea with songs, the desert to turn green with shades of love poetry, the trees to fill with migrant birds who nest to learn new melodies. The prize will carry her name. It will be called: Thuraya! Cousin Mutlag, I'll be listening for the announcement on the state broadcast after Isha prayers.*

(Recording burns out.)

Speaker Here, the scene burns out. Small, iconic scenes like this have become a source of obsession for many misguided segments of our society. Cited, quoted, uploaded and disseminated, this recording has generated a potent and dangerous mixture of nostalgia and civil disobedience. Our Leaders have spoken at length of their condemnation of these romantic tendencies and the scent of foreign intervention has already been sniffed.

Tonight, through a precise and scientific reconstruction of this decadent play, we reclaim our own history, provide a definitive guide to the confused and through you, dear friends, convey a message to the world at large that will defuse mounting hysteria and expose once and for all the hollowness of these derivative forms of cultural expression and their absolute *antithesis to progress*.

What you are about to see in no way aspires to be described as theatre and functions in full accordance with the laws of our land. Any member of the audience attracted here for what they might have heard about our previous works, namely, a salacious exposé of life under dictatorship, is welcome to leave now. Best wishes, full refund.

Envoys!

Enter the envoys, wearing lab coats, latex gloves, carrying scripts, clipboards and scientific objects. The Representative of the National Tourist Board carries a metre rule. The envoys line up in front of the projection screen.

To repeat: we have no desire to embody the decadence. The individuals before you are not actors: they are envoys.

The Representative of the National Tourist Board uses the metre rule to ensure he is at the correct distance from the nearest female envoy.

We respect the traditional law that proscribes a minimum of 90 centimetres between males and females. We are as ideologically neutral as palaeontologists armed with little more than tongs, a brush, a magnifying glass and a metre. (Addressing the envoys, in Arabic.) Introduce yourselves.

Rep. Council of Virtue My name is Faisal – no need to mention the family name, right?

Speaker Not applying for asylum, are we?

Rep. Council of Virtue No! I'm an envoy from the Council of Virtue.

- Speaker** You're not, in any way, an actor?
- Rep. Council of Virtue** God forbid.
- Speaker** *(Introducing the Sound Technician.)* We also have with us an international sound specialist, Mr Lewis, expert in all manner of reconstruction of decadence.
- Rep. Women's League** Carole – envoy from the Women's League.
- Former Actress** Amal, a former actress.
- Young Woman** *(Shies away from microphone.)*
- Speaker** Young and confused, move on.
- Rep. Tourist Board** Fayiz, envoy from the National Tourist Board – formerly a car mechanic.
- Rep. Student Union** Nassar, envoy from the Democratic League of Students.
- Rep. Writers' Union** Nicolas, envoy from the Writers' Union.
- Speaker** **Writers, artists, women's rights, tourism and free students, which proves, if ever proof were needed, how misunderstood we are.** *(An actress from the Golden Era appears via video link on the projection screen.)* **We have joining us now, via satellite, an important witness to the events we are reconstructing.** *(In Arabic.)* Introduce yourself, please.
- Actress from Golden Era** Hanan Hajj Ali, former actor.
- Speaker** You were involved in the original performance we are reconstructing tonight, in 1963?
- Actress from Golden Era** I was. The theatre has always been a temple of truth.
- Speaker** In the age of falsehood, perhaps. What was it to be an actor in those days?
- Actress from Golden Era** It was to be one who digs the dykes around the city,
Tempers the winds and tides of oblivion,
A lighthouse in the fog,
A witness to the crime,
The memory of a mother's song,
A firework glinting in the curve of a child's eye!
- Speaker** And now?
- Actress from Golden Era** Now? The theatres are closed. Music, like masturbation, is a

secret habit; women are the guardians of tribal values, show me a mouth that's not been filled with gold or silenced with sand ... Let's leave it to God.

Speaker *(Cutting her short.)* **Thank you! We are grateful to Madam Hanan, who has provided us with the original performance script from the 1963 play. (Envoys hold up their scripts.) And also the director's book from the original performance. (Envoys display clipboards.)**

Rep. Tourist Board *(The Representative of the Tourist Board indicates the video camera.)*

Speaker **Yes, the Ministry of Information is making a recording of this evening's events, strictly for archive purposes. Our second article of evidence, the sea coast after a shipwreck!**

Scene Two

On the archive film we see a woman, Fawz, and a Sea Captain stood before a painted coastal backdrop.

Fawz *Where are we?*

Sea Captain *This is Ilyaal.*

Fawz *Who rules here?*

Sea Captain *A noble Shaikh in nature as in name.*

The archive recording freezes, leaving Fawz's face on screen.

Speaker **Here, the sound is interrupted. Therefore, in the pursuit of our declared objectives, we have set about to reconstruct this lost performance using parts of the sound reel that remain intact and the fragments that reappear from time to time on the reel. (The projection screen is raised to reveal the laboratory.) The laboratory: a blessed bower. Through these simple instruments we achieve near total correspondence with the original artefact, without the pain of imitation. Here we make music that does not perturb the air – ha!**

The Former Actress and the Representative of the Student Union take up their positions on the raised platform in preparation for the reconstruction of the scene.

Speaker **Introduce your characters.**

Former Actress Fawz.

Rep. Student Union The Sea Captain.

Speaker **We pick up from where the sound cut out, 'Who rules here? / A noble ruler in nature as in name.'**

A bell rings to indicate the beginning of the reconstruction of this scene. Envoys follow the text and stage directions from their clipboards, while other Envoys monitor them, intermittently correcting their positions and gestures.

Fawz *I have heard of him from my father – he is a good ruler!*

Sea Captain *But he suffers terribly from the pangs of love.*

Envoy *Move to B4.*

Fawz *A ruler suffering from love?*

Sea Captain *He loves so much, announced a prize for the finest love song that will bring untold riches to the singer.*

Envoy *Turn your head 70 degrees.*

Fawz *And who is the woman who turns rulers into lovers?*

Sea Captain *Thuraya!*

Envoy *Eyes dilate, mouth opens: amazement!*

The Former Actress enacts amazement.

Sea Captain *The daughter of a rich merchant. First her mother died, then her father died, then her brother died and she not even married, all tangled in the weeds of mourning.*

Fawz *I want to meet her.*

Sea Captain *She'll see no one. Not even the Shaikh's messengers.*

Fawz *But I'm—*

Envoy *D3. (Both envoys move to D3, so the instruction is corrected.) Male to D3!*

Sea Captain *Follow me.*

Fawz *Where?*

Sea Captain *To the police! Telegram your kin, tell them you're alive.*

Envoy *Enact the desire to disappear!*

The Former Actress is taken aback by this instruction and hesitates.

Envoy *(From the sound monitoring post, cueing the Former Actress.) I beg you, and I'll pay you,*

Conceal me what I am, and be my aid ...

Through her hesitation, the Former Actress falls out of sync with the sound recording. The envoy monitoring the sound recording indicates there is an error in the reconstruction. The Sound Technician presses his buzzer to stop proceedings.

Speaker (To the audience.) **Our apologies. You appreciate the duress imitating acts antithetical to virtue puts us under. Take it back.**

The Sound Technician rewinds the reel-to-reel machine, the envoys reassume previous positions.

Envoy Female in A3, Male in C2.

The Sound Technician presses the buzzer to resume proceedings.

Fawz *I beg you, and I'll pay you,
Conceal me what I am, and be my aid.
I'll serve this Shaikh,
Thou shalt present me to him as an eunuch;
It will be worth your trouble, for I can sing
And speak to him in many sorts of music,
That will allow me very worth his service.*

Sea Captain *Be you his eunuch and I'll your mute be. Bell signals the end of the reconstructed scene.*

Former Actress Here, she puts on the captain's jacket and transforms herself into a member of the opposite sex.

Speaker (To the audience.) **A magnifying glass is not a mirror. This is a reconstruction of a historical performance and we do not in any way seek to make a new performance, challenge, question or reflect our reality through—**

Rep. Tourist Board Excuse me.

Speaker What is it?

Rep. Tourist Board She's dressing up as a man.

Speaker Yes, it's—

Rep. Tourist Board This was not shown to the committee.

Speaker Plenty wasn't shown to the committee – there was no time.

Rep. Tourist Board I have the minutes of the committee hearing.

Speaker I have a licence.

Rep. Tourist Board I'll see it.

Speaker **Ladies and Gentlemen, our dear colleague from the National Tourist Board is inquiring about the commission by which we perform for you tonight.** *(To the Representative of the Tourist Board.)* Stamp: Ministry of Information. Stamp: Ministry of Foreign Affairs. All's in order.

The Representative of the National Tourist Board takes the paper from the Speaker and shows it to the surveillance camera. The Representative of the Writers' Union takes advantage of this altercation to begin uncorking a bottle of wine.

Rep. Tourist Board May I clarify one thing?

Speaker Surely.

Rep. Tourist Board The National Tourist Board does not regard a woman dressing up as a man as part of our country's tourist attractions. It is not on the list.

The wine cork pops noisily out of the bottle. The Representative of the Tourist Board turns in alarm. The Sound Technician promptly sounds the bell for the reconstruction to recommence. The Former Actress and the Representative of the Council of Virtue swiftly take up their positions on the raised platform.

Rep. Council of Virtue *(Introducing his character.)* The Ruler.

On the projection screen we see a carnet de mise-en-scène, showing colour-coded stage trajectories and cue lines.

Speaker *(Holding the carnet de mise-en-scène.)* Refer yourself to the drawings.

On the raised platform, Fawz is now dressed as a male servant.

Ruler Fawz?

Fawz Command me, my King!

Ruler How long have I known you?

Fawz Three days, you of the long life.

Ruler Whether it's the honesty I sense in your soul or the skill of your tongue, whatever it is I have opened my heart to you like a woman.

Fawz Your praise embarrasses me.

The Speaker signals his dissatisfaction to the Sound Technician, who presses the buzzer to stop the reconstruction.

Speaker Faisal, please. You are playing the Ruler; show some dignity, some charisma!

Rep. Council of Virtue I'm not here to act.

Rep. Tourist Board Well said, boy!

Speaker The laboratory protects you. Try harder: a Ruler!

The bell restarts the reconstruction.

Ruler *I need you to undertake a mission. How's your falconry?*

Fawz *I have a good hand, my bird soars high and dives hard as stones.*

Ruler *I need you to be that bird diving unseen.*

Fawz *Your prey?*

Ruler *More precious than my own eyes: Thuraya.*

Fawz *She's no bustard, my Lord, and craftier than a magpie.*

Ruler *Fear not: you have what other men lack—*

Fawz *I rather lack what they have—*

The Representative of the Writers' Union chuckles at the innuendo and is swiftly upbraided by a glance from the Representative of the Tourist Board.

Ruler *You will carry the sentence and text of my love.*

Fawz *O heavy sentence! What if she won't let me in?*

The Speaker removes his suit jacket and signals to the Representative of the Student Union to place it on the Representative of the Council of Virtue's shoulders – an improvised costume element to help him overcome his timidity, which he does.

Ruler *Lay siege to her house. Deliver the text unblemished, unperturbed, entire. You will have tents, food, gifts, men – even a generator!*

Fawz *But I'm too young!*

Ruler *Your youth will make her muscles tense, your poems make her tremble; when she trembles, slip in my name, just like that, slip it in. Bring me her heart and I swear you will live like a King.*

Fawz *I'll speak of love as only lovers can, I know the sleepless night and the breathless day and I'll make her endure them.*

Ruler *She's dry as a desert.*

Fawz *If there's moisture in her, I'll feel it.*

A group of envoys laugh boisterously at the innuendo. In response, the Representative of the Tourist Board taps the metre rule emphatically on the steel laboratory table.

Speaker *We despise filth!*

Ruler *If you touch her, I'll blacken your face with tar!*

Fawz *My metaphor undid me—*

Ruler *Go. I entrust my love to you, like Solomon to the hoopoe. Give me your hand.*

Bell signals the end of the reconstructed scene. The Speaker steps onto the raised wooden platform, ostensibly to reclaim his jacket from the Representative of the Council of Virtue.

Speaker *(To the audience.)* **We know this character is a woman, masquerading as a man. The Ruler does not know this. We know more than the Ruler.** *(The Speaker surreptitiously places a small, red notebook into the pocket of the Former Actress's lab coat.)*
What you call dramatic irony, we regard as the toxic seedlings of an anti- social process.

Rep. Writers' Union I've written a poem about that.

Speaker It's not part of the reconstruction—

Rep. Writers' Union But it was awarded a state prize.

Speaker A state prize! We'll have to hear it.

Rep. Writers' Union *(Addressing the Representative of the Tourist Board, who listens with suspicion at first, then glowing pride.)* If I knew more than you, my King of Kings:
 Then summers, winters, all my springs
 Are dead, dry, waterless things,
 And in submission to your rod
 Like Abraham to almighty God,
 Dumb with joy, I'd load the gun
 And empty it in my own son
 I'd blow his brains and, in good turn,
 Undo the father of the sperm.

Your looks, your eyes, your manly gaze
 Where to start or end our praise
 Your mother's breast, your father's loins,
 The brow that shines from all our coins?
 O, never say your line ends here
 Or birth in us a cruel despair
 Take women, virgins – don't be mild –
 Bestow on us your chosen child
 That as you mount us, so your sons
 May one day serve their citizens.

Though faults you have, your virtues thin

To us you're pure as heroin;
 A poppy bulb, your iron fist
 An ornate pipe your long, black list;
 Into the void, it sucks the name
 Of every dark, crystal shame
 To feed the endless, hungry flame.

Wrap your hands around my throat,
 Of honour there's no finer coat
 Squeeze tighter, prone the gorge to pay
 Right tribute to its dying day
 And loud, I cry, with dying breath:
 Come now, o sweet and happy death!

All clap.

Speaker **Uplifting poetry! Unlike the next excerpt of decadence we are obliged to present.**

Scene Three

Speaker **This scene takes place in the house of Thuraya, the same Thuraya that the Ruler wishes to woo. It is a house draped in the cloak of mourning, but the sombre tones of the Quran are quickly uprooted by the nauseous excesses of the Drunken Uncle—**

Rep. Writers' Union Sono io!

Speaker **He speaks some Italian. (Continuing his narration.) ... and his entourage – Nishami, the house maid; Faris, the Rich Idiot; and Feylooti, a blind fool.**

To identify the characters they are playing, the envoys obediently raise their hands on cue.

Speaker **For the purposes of our demonstration and to allow you to apprehend the gravity of this innocent-seeming sub-plot, we have digitally suppressed the sound of the dialogue leaving only the sounds of the audience reaction, which clearly expose the corrupting intentions of the scene, without you being distracted by the quality of the acting, which is irrelevant.**

We hear the sound of the audience from the 1963 production. On the archive film, we see Tagtiga and Nishami seated on a bench in Thuraya's courtyard. Between them is an old radio transistor tuned into a melodious reading from the Quran. Tagtiga is visibly annoyed by the sound of the Quran and extends his arm to turn the radio off. Nishami slaps his hand. This repeats several times to the boundless amusement, hoots and cackles of the 1963 audience. The envoys on the raised wooden platform read from their scripts to provide voiceover for the archive film. The sound of the Quran on the radio is provided by an envoy from a monitoring table.

Tagtiga reaches out his hand to turn off the radio.

Nishami *(Slapping his hand.) No.*

Tagtiga *reaches out his hand to turn off the radio.*

Nishami *(Slapping his hand.) No, no, no!*

Tagtiga *(Emphatically turning the radio off.) I swear we'll hear a love song! The 1963 audience explodes into raucous laughter.*

Speaker **From the Holy Quran to a love song: is this valid art? Next clip!**

Nishami *My lady Thuraya will go mad with your drunkenness and caterwauling!*

Tagtiga *Will my niece never tire of mourning? Not even the Hussein had this much blubber and wailing. She's diseased and needs a doctor.*

Nishami *She complained bitterly about you today.*

Tagitiga *Who to?*

Nishami *Mullah Farhan.*

On the archive film, we see Mullah Farhan poke his head through a window above the courtyard, listening to the conversation below, unseen. He is a stock character from Arab comedy at the time, an Islamist with a long beard, shortened thowb, armed with a whipping stick. The Representative of the Tourist Board, who will assume the role of the Mullah, steps onto the raised wooden platform, wearing a stage beard and waving the metre rule. He copies the Mullah's silent reactions.

Speaker **The Mullah, the only God-fearing, upright character in the scene—**

Rep. Tourist Board **Present!**

Tagtiga *Ah the rage! I the son of a nobleman forced to watch imposters lay siege to my own house!*

Nishami *She cherishes his company above anyone else's.*

Tagtiga *Because she's sick!*

Nishami *Because you left her alone with him.*

Tagtiga *I brought her Faris.*

Nishami *The idiot Prince!*

Tagtiga *A true prince!*

Nishami *Who stinks of arak – a lecherous, bad poet, he is. End of clip.*

Speaker **Faris, the Rich Idiot, also loves Thuraya—**

The Representative of the Tourist Board, sniffing out the source of the scent of alcohol, approaches the Representative of the Writers' Union. Fast, furtive, non-demonstrative dialogue.

Rep. Writers' Union What?

Rep. Tourist Board I can smell it.

Rep. Writers' Union Keep your distance: 90 centimetres!

Rep. Tourist Board The metre divides members of the opposite sex.

Rep. Writers' Union I am of the opposite sex, I'm a hermaphrodite, how's that?
Keep away!

Rep. Tourist Board What's in that cup?

Rep. Writers' Union Not much.

Rep. Tourist Board Give me the cup!

Rep. Writers' Union You want this cup? (*Downs the contents of his cup in one gulp and hands over the empty cup.*) Here's the cup!

The Representative of the Tourist Board smells the cup, returns to his monitoring station and carefully bags the object into a transparent evidence bag.

Speaker (*To the audience.*) **Civil harmony is strained from the moment we begin to play with theatre. It contaminates. It sours. It poisons.**

The Representative of the Writers' Union makes an apologetic sign of deference to the Speaker. The other envoys, eager to resume the reconstruction on the raised wooden platform, have assumed their next positions.

Speaker **Next clip.** (*The archive film resumes. In it, we see Faris enter the Courtyard with a bouquet of flowers, followed by Feylooti the Blind Fool.*) **Faris, the Rich Idiot, supplies the Drunken Uncle with the means required to maintain his lifestyle, and—**

The Representative of the Student Union, carrying the bouquet of flowers in line with the archive footage, has smuggled a second cup of wine onto the raised platform and surreptitiously hands it to the Representative of the Writers' Union who, with a self-satisfied grin, raises it to salute the health of the Representative Tourist Board.

Speaker **And, in return, the Drunken Uncle strings the idiot along with the promise of Thuraya's hand.**

The Representative of the Women's League moves into the centre of the raised platform and holds her right hand aloft, as an item of evidence. It is gloved in white silk. With her wrist and fingers, she makes a distinct, balletic movement with her hand in the air: this choreographed hand movement is a sign that will be relayed to and imitated by other envoys. Hereinafter it is referred to as the 'revolutionary signal'.

Speaker *(Referring to the revolutionary signal.)* **The object of so many desires ... Faris, the Rich Idiot is a poet.**

Faris *My heart has been split in two, like a melon that fell from a Daihatsu. The archive film runs into a technical problem and repeats a series of frames endlessly. Obedient to the rules of the reconstruction, the envoys on the raised wooden platform repeat the same cycle of actions like giddy automatons. The Representative of the Women's League remains centre stage with her gloved hand raised; Faris the Rich Idiot raises and lowers the bouquet of flowers; Feylooti the Blind Fool wanders back and forth, Tagtiga raises and lowers his arm to applaud the poetry.*

Speaker **And so it continues – endless cycles of debauchery and nostalgia. It lurks within us like a disease. We are harshest on ourselves and draw strength from our strife. Enough of this dirty little scene! *(Bell signals the end of the reconstructed scene.)* Time for a musical interlude!**

On the screen we see the words 'Musical Interlude' as the Speaker and actors wait in total silence, without movement and count ten seconds.

Thank you.

Normal movement resumes.

Scene Four

The envoys move around the laboratory assuming their positions in preparation for the next phase of the reconstruction. On the raised platform, with minimal props, the Representatives of the Tourist Board, the Women's League and the Young Woman. A black-and-white photograph, projected behind them, shows a still from the 1963 production. The scene is inside Thuraya's house.

Rep. Tourist Board The Mullah reciting the Quran.

Rep. Women's League Thuraya standing by the window.

Young Woman Nishami holding the mirror.

The bell announces the start of a reconstruction.

Nishami *Are you sick?*

Thuraya *No.*

Nishami *Drowsy?*

Thuraya *No.*

Nishami *He sent you flowers.*

Thuraya *Which one?*

Nishami *The one I said looked like a donkey and you said no, more bovine.*

Thuraya *Oh, him.*

Nishami *The Ambassador to Geneva. The one your uncle envies.*

Thuraya *Mullah?*

Mullah *Madam?*

Thuraya *What say you?*

Mullah *Ambassadors are oiled in deceit.*

Thuraya *No, then.*

Nishami *The Minister of Commerce sent you a gold watch.*

Thuraya *He is very kind. Mullah?*

Mullah *The Minister has peeled skin off the people's backs to place gold on your wrists.*

Thuraya *(To Nishami) You keep it, dear. How I ache!*

Nishami *Fever?*

Thuraya *No.*

Nishami *Where is the pain?*

Thuraya *If only I knew!*

Envoy *Enter Feylooti.*

Nishami *Feylooti!*

Speaker **In the interests of scientific accuracy, we have allowed ourselves to reconstruct ten-second clips of the lost music, in accordance with the Science of Sound Act.**

Feylooti sings an excerpt from a salacious folk song for ten seconds, the others count time on

their fingers, at the end of ten seconds a buzzer sounds and Feylooti promptly desists.

Nishami *Where have you been!*

Thuraya *Five days you've left me alone.*

Feylooti *I was at the poetry conference.*

Mullah *Smells like it.*

Feylooti *These are the flowers of paradise, Mullah, the flowers of paradise are not haram.*

Mullah *If we were not in such genteel company, I would teach you a lesson or two.*

Feylooti *How exciting! What would you do?*

Mullah *My lady, do not encourage him with laughter – there's a quick remedy for his folly; canes with salted tips—*

Feylooti *I beg you give the travesty his cane!*

Mullah *May I eject this animal?*

Feylooti *This is the prelude to dictatorship, mark my words.*

Thuraya *You speak of politics.*

Mullah *Can a drunkard poet speak of politics, my lady?*

Thuraya *You speak of politics and I say there is nothing that I lack to speak of politics as well as any man.*

Feylooti *Except a husband. I see you've pricked up your ears. Mullah!*

Thuraya *I want to enter into politics.*

Envoy *The two females advance.*

Mullah *My lady, please—*

Thuraya *Why not?*

Envoy *The two females advance.*

Mullah *It's not in your interests to think like that.*

Thuraya *To speak of politics as well as any man, I lack for nothing.*

Feylooti *(Imitating the Mullah.) Except a husband. I see your ears have pricked up,*

Mullah!

Mullah *Can I throw this animal out?*

Envoy Enter Tagtiga. Drunk.

Tagtiga *By God, someone's come back from Basra smelling ripe! (To Mullah.) Or is it you, goat herder?*

Thuraya *What is it to be drunk at ten in the morning, Uncle?*

Tagtiga *Do not cast blame it excites my blood
Cure me rather with another drop of grog.⁶⁴ There's a boy leading an army outside.*

Thuraya *What kind of boy?*

Tagtiga *A boy-like boy!*

Thuraya *Mullah, go to them, if they're from the Shaikh, make it clear I will not see any more of his envoys.*

Envoy Exit Mullah and Nishami.

Tagtiga *When the Ruler sends envoys to your door, you can't keep it shut for long.*

Thuraya *You are not to interfere with my personal life, Uncle.*

Tagtiga *Stubborn wench! Come on, Feylooti, tell me about the real boys in Basra.
The Representative of the Council of Virtue sings a drinking song.*

Speaker *(Stopping the song after ten seconds.) Enough!*

Envoy Enter Mullah and Nishami.

Mullah *This boy has the devil in his eye; do not see him.*

Thuraya *Did you send him packing?*

Mullah *He's determined and has started setting up tents. He's got fiddlers with him; they're tuning up.*

Envoy Suggest desire.

The Young Woman places the fingertip of her latex glove between her teeth and stretches it erotically. The Representative of the Women's League emits a diminutive, erotic sob. Actions are performed punctually and, once completed, neutrality is resumed.

Thuraya *Let him in.*

⁶⁴ Free translation of Abu Nawas's verse.

Mullah *But, madam, I—*

Thuraya *I said let him in. Nishami, our veils! (The two women veil themselves.)*

Former Actress *(Stepping onto the raised platform.) Enter Fawz!*

Fawz *The honourable the lady of the house, which is she?*

Nishami *We are both honourable ladies in this house.*

Thuraya *This house is full of ladies!*

Fawz *I demand to know which of you is Thuraya? (Gesturing to them to leave.)*
Exit Mullah, exit Nishami. Go on!

The Representative of the Tourist Board and Young Woman step off the raised platform.

Thuraya *Where lies your text?*

Fawz *In the Ruler's bosom.*

Thuraya *O, I have read it – it is heresy.*

Fawz *Good madam, let me see your face.*

Thuraya *Have you any commission from your lord to negotiate with my face? But we will draw the curtain and show you the picture. Is it not well done?*

Fawz *Lady, you are the cruellest she alive,
If you will lead these graces to the grave,
And leave the world no copy.*

Thuraya *O, sir, I will not be so hard-hearted; it shall be inventoried, and labell'd to my will – as – item, two lips indifferent red; item, two grey eyes with lids to them; item, one neck, one chin, and so forth. Were you sent hither to praise me?*

Fawz *I see you what you are – you are too proud. My lord and master loves you!*

Thuraya *I cannot love him. Tell him that.*

Fawz *If I did love you in my master's flame, In your denial I would find no sense; I would not understand it.*

Thuraya *What would you if you were you?*

Fawz *If I were I?*

Thuraya *If you were you.*

Fawz *Make me a willow cabin at your gate,*

*And call upon my soul within the house;
Write loyal cantons of contemned love
And sing them loud even in the dead of night ...*

She looks to the Speaker and glances at the red notebook.

I'd turn myself into a fruit seller
And set my body aflame in the square
I'd scratch your initials on the school walls
Take a bullet to the chest and turn the gash
Into a spring millions flock to drink from
I'd chant your name through a year of Fridays
Thuraya, Thuraya, Thuraya:
Huriya, Huriya, Huriya!!!⁶⁵

The bell is rung, the buzzer sounded, the table banged, the lab descends into turmoil. The Representative of the Tourist Board locks the Former Actress in a choking grip, a scrum forms on the centre of the stage obscuring the Former Actress both from the video surveillance camera and the audience.

Rep. Writers' Union (Laconically.) As poetry, purely as poetry – it was better than average.

Speaker (From the podium.) It has been noted.

Rep. Tourist Board Noted? (Confrontationally.) Noted?!

Former Actress I'd like to say in my defence that—

Speaker There's no need. **Time for the Tourist Board Presentation!**

Generic elevator music plays. On the projection screen we see images from the National Tourist Board: a beach; a school building; a state hospital; a gazelle in a desert landscape. The Representative of the Tourist Board is handed a microphone.

Rep. Tourist Board Our public beaches: not a dead fish anywhere.
Our schools unearth – I mean – bury fundamentalism. Our hospitals render death banal.
Our Arab Spring: see how the gazelle leaps over flowers in bloom.

Former Actress Allow me to clarify ...

The Female Envoys Allow her to clarify ... (All the females in unison.) Our Guardian knows best.

All smile. End of elevator music.

Speaker **Excellent. We continue.**

⁶⁵ Huriya: Arabic, meaning 'Freedom'.

Resuming the reconstruction, colder now.

Envoy A6 and B3.

Thuraya *You might do much. What is your parentage?*

Fawz *Above my fortunes, yet my state is well: I am a gentleman.*

Thuraya *Get you to your lord. I cannot love him; let him send no more – Unless
perchance you come to me again
To tell me how he takes it. Fare you well.*

Fawz *Farewell, fair cruelty.*

The Former Actress approaches the Representative of the Women's League and discreetly places the red notebook into her lab-coat pocket, then descends from the raised platform, singing. The buzzer cuts short her song after ten seconds and she presents herself in front of the steel table of the Representative of the Tourist Board, empties her pockets, is fingerprinted and signs a paper that is filed into a box.

Thuraya *Even so quickly may one catch the plague? Mullah!*

Rep. Tourist Board *(Fingerprinting the Former Actress.) I'm busy!*

Speaker *(To the Young Woman.) Step in for him.*

The Young Woman recuperates the Mullah's beard and steps hesitantly onto the raised platform to assume the role of the Mullah. During this time, the Representative of the Women's League discreetly hands the red notebook to the Representative of the Writers' Union.

Mullah *Here, madam.*

Thuraya *Run after that boy. He left this image in my mind, not an image, a swirl of
images, not a swirl, a horde of possibilities, a promise, a pearl. Tell him I'll none of it.*

She hands her a pearl, then grasps the Young Woman's jaw firmly in her hand and, with her other hand, pointedly displays the choreographed hand movement, the revolutionary signal.

Thuraya *If the youth will come this way tomorrow, I'll give him reasons for it. Go,
Mullah.*

Mullah *Madam, I will.*

The Young Woman steps off the platform and returns the beard to the Representative of the Tourist Board.

Thuraya *(To the Speaker.) After a power cut, blindness descends, But for eyes
accustomed to darkness,
Colours lie in ambush – blind fool!*

The Representative of the Council of Virtue steps onto the platform as Feylooti, the Blind Fool. The Representative of the Student Union moves a light fixture into place. Feylooti and Thuraya turn to walk upstage, hold out their arms towards one another without touching, until the shadow of their hands clasped together is seen on the projection screen. The Representative of the Tourist Board escorts the Former Actress behind the projection screen and, again in shadow, we see him fumigate her.

Act Two, the Elaborations

The Tyranny of the Text, Scene One

Speaker *(To the audience.)* **Indeed, the journeys towards liberty are comic. But you seem not to be attuned to the dangers inherent in this type of resistance. The woman's improvisation, in which you played no small role, the reckless mixing of her wayward imagination with your complicit silence, the energy that fed her, the energy of a faceless mob shrouded in darkness, incited her to lose her mind and led us to this dangerous juncture. What you call playfulness is to us social suicide. Though we had hoped not to have to resort to such populist methods, it is clear that to help you perceive the dangers of which we speak, I must bring to bear the full brunt of my commission tonight: Bring on the costumes!**

The costumes from the 1963 production descend on a rack from above. Over the next few scenes, each envoy will gradually wear more and more elements of costume. The Representative of the Council of Virtue calls out the items from a list.

Rep. Council of Virtue The Ruler: two items. Feylooti, the Blind Fool: two items. Thuraya: four items. Nishami, the Housemaid: three items. Tagtiga, the Drunken Uncle: two items. The Rich Idiot: two items. Fawz: no items. The Mullah:—

Rep. Tourist Board *(Entering already dressed as the Mullah.)* Ten items. All other items are strictly off bounds. It's my scene next, what are we waiting for?

Former Actress *(Already on the raised platform.)* You!

Rep. Tourist Board *Who has the pearl? (Snatching it from the Young Woman.)*
The bell, the bell!

Envoy Female in B3 her back to male in A4; male leans – her arse protrudes; she turns, male leans – her breasts protrude; she leaps.

Mullah *Tricks, toys and trinkets: heresies all in the fires of hell!*

Envoy Throws the pearl at her.

The Representative of the Tourist Board throws the pearl at the Former Actress.

Fawz *How dare you throw stones at me, Mullah!*

Mullah *You kneel and collect it, boy, you know it is a pearl, take it back to your master, let him cash it in elsewhere; Madam Thuraya will have none of your pirouettes and double chat.*

Fawz *What pirouettes? What double—*

Mullah *Your poetry and devilry – do you think Thuraya can be bought with gypsy gifts?*

Fawz *I never gave her anything!*

Mullah *You lie and you mince, you excite both men and women, you are a menace to decent habits and the stability of married life.*

Fawz *What married life? Sex and procreation!*

The Representative of the Tourist Board has been subconsciously moving the metre rule in and out of his cupped palm, imitating the act of penetration. Realizing this, he stops momentarily and then resumes the action in an exaggerated manner, inviting the smutty laughter from some of the other envoys.

Fawz *You filthy man!*

Speaker *(To the audience.)* **Our colleague from the Tourist Board has tendencies.**

The Representative of the Tourist Board looks furiously at the Speaker, who has improvised at his expense.

Mullah *If I see you again: it's this stick to your whippable, transvestite arse.*

Fawz *What religion is yours?*

Mullah *Neither the delinquents', nor the cross-dressers'—*

Fawz *Do they have their own religions?*

Mullah *I am with the Organization, gelding.*

Fawz *I fear Allah and name his prophet as straight as the next man.*

Envoy *(Sings the call to prayer.)*

Mullah *(Hearing the call to prayer.) I must make ablutions after you – (To the Speaker.) you are on my list.*

The Representative of the Tourist Board steps down from the raised platform.

Fawz *What's this? A pearl. A giant pearl. Oh God, have I charmed you? The triangle is complete: My master loves Thuraya, I love my master and Thuraya loves me! It's diabolic, where in the folds of time can I hide this face? I have a life waiting for me that is a*

series of still images I can already see. Me in a wedding dress; me with my first child, me with my second child; me, stooped with my children grown tall around me, me dead. (As she speaks, she removes her latex lab gloves.) And there's another life waiting for me, I cannot see in any way, but I feel its circumference, dark and deep as a lake, at the edge of my fingertips.

The Former Actress addresses the next lines to the Representative of the Council of Virtue and, in doing so, relays the revolutionary signal to him.

*When water stands still it turns foul
And the arrow that does not leave the bow, can never touch the target;
I am one who has always known she will die young.*

Bell announces end of scene.

Envoy Feylooti tells a joke. *Bell announces start of scene.*

Feylooti *A 90-year-old fella marries a 17-year-old lass. It's their wedding night and he says, 'Come on, then, love.' And she says, 'I don't know what to do, love.' And he says, 'Baaaaaa! She don't know and I've right forgotten.'*

Pre-recorded laughter from the 1963 audience combines with the envoys genuine amusement at the joke. A wave of silliness and chaotic, childlike energy washes across the laboratory. The Representative of the Tourist Board taps his metre rule emphatically on the steel laboratory table to restore order.

Speaker *(Coyly to the audience.)* **Our colleague from the Tourist Board doesn't appreciate that type of humour – he doesn't easily rise to the challenge himself.**

The envoys giggle. The Representative of the Tourist Board crosses the stage to confront the Speaker and, in crossing, notices the Young Woman and the Representative of the Writers' Union fumbling to hide something. He stops abruptly, moves towards them, searches amongst the papers and props and finds the Speaker's red notebook. He opens it, reads from it, then calmly indicates to the Speaker to come towards him.

Speaker *(To the audience.)* **Excuse me.**

The Representative of the Tourist Board marches the Speaker off stage brusquely.

Scene Two, The Singing Leviathan

A wave of anxiety and nervous energy descends on the laboratory. The Representative of the Writers' Union, inebriated, excited, moves to the Speaker's podium.

Rep. Writers' Union **This next scene – one of my favourites – saw it when I was eight. It is properly, truly filthy: beautiful! Mr Lewis, bell, please.**

The bell sounds. The envoys take their positions mechanically and begin to deliver the lines.

Faris *Here comes the fool, i' faith.*

Envoy Nishami ululates.

The Young Woman obeys the instruction, without gusto.

Rep. Writers' Union *(Wearily.) Mr Lewis, buzzer, please.*

A buzzer is sounded to stop the reconstruction. The envoys do not understand. The Representative of the Writers' Union moves towards them, swaying gently.

Rep. Writers' Union What are you doing! Why do you think the costumes were brought in?! This scene is special! Its filth is real: in it, there's a man disguised as a woman! Get your togs on, and you *(To Young Woman.)* rub some lipstick on your smackers! *(To the audience.)* **My mother – bless her soul – used this scene to prove to us boys the dangers awaiting those who didn't wash their hands before supper, 'you'll end up like a bad lot, like Tagtiga and his pals in that terrible play'. No need to archive this.** *(He takes the Young Woman's headscarf.)* **Its place is carved in the heart.** *(He places the headscarf over the lens of the surveillance camera.)* Play it now, play it well – **bell!**

The bell announces the start of the scene. The stage picture, the colours of the lights, the brilliance of the costumes, all recall the Golden Age.⁶⁶ We are entering a new level of artifice in which the laboratory, momentarily, appears bearable. The sound of audience laughter from the 1960s is heard alongside the hiss of the historical recording.

Faris *Here comes the fool, i' faith.*

Envoy Nishami ululates.

The Young Woman ululates with relish. The Representative of the Council of Virtue enters, adorned in a sequin dress with wig, dark glasses, and with a white-gloved hand. He is dressed as the diva of 1960s Arab song, star of the East 'Kawkab al Sharq': Um Kalthoum.

Feylooti *How now, my hearts! Did you never see the picture of a man in a dress?*

Tagtiga *Welcome, ya Sitt.⁶⁷ Let's have a catch.*

Faris *By my troth, the fool has an excellent breast. I had rather than 40 rupees I had such a leg, and so sweet a breath to sing, as the fool has.*

Feylooti *My lady's hand is white. (He displays the revolutionary signal to the Former Actress.)*

⁶⁶ The Golden Age of Arab Culture in the Twentieth Century refers to a period between the mid-1920s to the mid-1960s and varies from one country to another. This period combined the excitement of independence from colonial powers, the rise of the massively popular pan-Arab agenda of General Jamal Abdul Nasser in Egypt and the sense of new horizons opening before the people of the region. During this time, the region witnessed a distinct flourishing in the production of films, novels, music and theatre. One of the symbols of this era was the Egyptian singer, Um Kalthoum.

⁶⁷ 'Ya Sitt' – a pseudonym and term of reverence for Um Kalthoum.

Tagtiga *Where are you going?*

Nishami *To turn down the lights. (She steps off the platform to change her dress.)*

Feylooti *Would you have a love song, or a song of good life?*

Nishami *A love song, a love song!*

A vintage microphone descends from above and a follow spotlight encircles Feylooti. As the sound of violins starts the introduction to Um Kalthoum's 'Al Hobbi Ay' (What is Love), he begins to sing. The Former Actress stands, enamoured, on the edge of the circle of light. The Representative of the Writers' Union seizes the Young Woman and seats her affectionately on his lap. All accompany the song, as chorus.

Rep. Writers' Union You're laughing!

Young Woman I can't help it.

Rep. Writers' Union This was something else, this was something other, it was like,
like ... watching a revolution!

A loud noise interrupts the magic. Enter the Representative of the Tourist Board and the Speaker, holding a copy of Shakespeare's Twelfth Night aloft. The Speaker has been physically abused.

Speaker *(In the language of the host venue.)* **I denounce myself.**

Rep. Tourist Board In Arabic!

Speaker *(In Arabic.)* I was the originator of the transgressive improvisation. I displayed wilful negligence in my duty towards the committee; I obscured the true origins of the 1963 play: an adaptation of William Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, written in 1601. I have conspired with this foreign source. In my defence, I say only that my real intention was to highlight the majestic historical transformation prophesied in the Shakespearean play that brought, 40 years after this play was written, the Puritans to power in England. The Puritans, keen protectors of civic health and their nation's standing in the world, enforced the closures of all theatres that harboured the 'sinful' entertainment. England became a great nation because of the Puritans. Many scholars, religious and otherwise, verify this. *(He signs the written confession, the Representative of the Tourist Board pockets it. Then, aside:)*

A plague upon sailors
The sea follows not a direction ...

Rep. Writers' Union *(Completing the verse.)* ... rather, directions follow the sea.⁶⁸

Speaker *(To the envoys.)* Don't stop! You cannot stop!

⁶⁸ Extract from Mudaffar Al Nawwab's poem, 'Arus al Saffa'in' (*The Queen of Ships*).

The envoys resume the scene and song with renewed vigour; they dance and hop between the squares of the raised platform, marking the rhythm with their names: A3-B4-C6. To underline the requisite literalism – as he sees it – expected of the reconstruction, the Representative of the Tourist Board carries a stepladder onto the raised platform ensuring his character, the Mullah, is correctly positioned in the window of the upper floor of Thuraya's courtyard, which is projected on the screen.

Mullah *Are you mad?! This is dancing, this is bending, this is transvestitism! Will blatant filth encroach on our beds and no man stir?*

Dead silence. The Representative of the Writers' Union, with a wave of his hand, makes the signal of the revolution.

Speaker **Witness: London, the 11th of February 1647.**

On screen the portrait of Oliver Cromwell. The Representative of the Women's League enters dressed as a seventeenth-century English Puritan and reads, in English, from the act of the English Parliament.

Rep. Women's League **By ordinance of the present parliament: 'All Stage-players are hereby declared to be, and are, and shall be taken to be Rogues, and openly and publicly whipt, Further, every person which shall be present and a Spectator at any such Stage-play, shall forfeit and pay the price of watching. Pay the price of watching!'**

A flashlight photograph of the stage is taken from within the audience.

Speaker *(To the audience.)* **We didn't ask you to turn off your mobile phones. I urge you to use them responsibly – bear witness.**

Rep. Tourist Board **Are you done? Where are your scripts? I command you to follow the text as written!**

Rep. Council of Virtue **It's his line, not mine!** *(Pointing towards the Representative of the Writers' Union.)*

Young Woman *(Whispering the line, imploringly.)* **We do stir and keep time, too!**

Rep. Writers' Union *(Unbuttoning his pants.)* **Is this what you're looking for?**

The Representative of the Tourist Board notices the headscarf that obscures the video camera and rushes to remove it.

Rep. Tourist Board *(Holding up the headscarf.)* **Whose is this?**

Rep. Writers' Union **Mine.**

The Representative of the Tourist Board smells the headscarf and fixes his gaze on the Young Woman.

Speaker We are respecting the text!

Young Woman *A flower, a flower for my master!*

The Representative of the Tourist Board lunges at her and stabs the metre rule into her lower abdomen.

Rep. Tourist Board Dirty little whore! *(Raises the metre rule to strike her again. The Representative of the Student Union snatches it, the Former Actress points out the incorrectness of his position on the platform: he is outnumbered and has lost his metre rule.)* This hand will do more! *(Exits.)*

Nishami *(In pain.) Sting me! Slap me! Burn me! I'll make you regret the day you first tasted your mother's milk.*

Rep. Writers' Union *(Ruminating and eating peanuts, in Italian and French.)* Un idea magnifica! Une idée magnifique! *(Reading from the stage directions of the 1963 text.)* 'Scene Nine: In which the Lady's Maid, Nishami, makes a trap for the Mullah by forging a letter of unbridled fondness in her lady's hand, which she imitates well.'

Young Woman *(Under her breath.)* Bastards.

Rep. Writers' Union I'm thinking! I'm trying to promote tourism inside this Leviathan. *(To the Representative of the Womens' League.)* Comrade, sister?

Rep. Womens' League Drunken poet.

Rep. Writers' Union Could you be convinced to – how should I put it – whore for the cause?

Rep. Womens' League Will you write my part? Rep. Writers' Union We'll all write it.

Rep. Tourist Board *(Off.)* Representative of the National Student Union!

Summoned, the Representative of the National Student Union leaves the stage.

Rep. Council of Virtue *(Nervous.)* Where's the palace?

Scene Three

The items of set from the Ruler's Palace, as seen in the archive film, are introduced. Though each item is tagged and labelled, in conformity with the rules of the reconstruction, the assembly of the palace is nonetheless theatrically impressive, almost operatic. The state is showing its strength, flexing its muscles; drapes fly in, a 1960s chandelier appears, a seat

upholstered in zebra skin is carried on. The Representative of the Tourist Board oversees this, whipping stick in hand.

Speaker **Palace scene, palace scene, palace scene.**

Bell announces the start of the reconstruction.

Ruler *Have you learnt it, my little hawk?*

Fawz *By heart.*

Ruler *That is my text, my heart's constitution, the text by which she is the Ruler, I am the Ruled: go to her with that.*

Fawz *I can't go again.*

Ruler *Why not?*

Fawz *She won't be won.*

Ruler *Why not?*

Former Actress *I went to her with your 'text' and she received it like a knife to the womb.*

The Representative of the Council of Virtue silently urges her not to improvise.

Ruler *Fawz, are you in love?*

Fawz *Yes!*

Ruler *With Thuraya!*

Fawz *No!*

Ruler *Who then?*

Fawz *One who's not even aware of my existence.*

Ruler *Name her.*

Fawz *I can't.*

Ruler *Is she tall?*

Fawz *About your height.*

Ruler *Complexion?*

Fawz *Not far from yours.*

- Ruler** *Figure?*
- Fawz** *Not unlike yours.*
- Ruler** *Age?*
- Fawz** *About yours.*
- Ruler** *Veiled?*
- Fawz** *In impossibility.*
- Ruler** *Thighs like mine and my age? I know her – pluck her like a thorn from your heart!*
- Former Actress** *And you? Can you pluck the revolution⁶⁹ out of yours?*
- Ruler** *Thuraya is not part of my heart, she is central to my agenda!*
- Fawz** *Must I go?*
- Ruler** *As your name promises: to Victory!*

The Former Actress sings a couplet from Asmahan's 'Ya Raytni Tayr' (If only I were a bird). The Representative of the Tourist Board crosses to the Speaker's podium, removes the Speaker's suit jacket, ejects him from the podium and assumes the role of the Speaker.

Speaker *Be my guest.*

Rep. Tourist Board *(To the audience, in host language.) Hello, I speak only Arabic. (In Arabic.)* Good evening, gracious guests. The next few scenes form the crux of tonight's presentation. I'm in all of them. Through them, you will see how an upright, God-fearing citizen is seduced into animalistic desire, madness and extremism. The chaos and anarchy that follow are the direct results of a surfeit and excess of freedom. *(To the envoys.)* I remind you: treason is a poisoned sea, those that die in it are not to be mourned. I will give my all.

Speaker *(In Arabic.)* And so will I – we spare no one. Rules of combat: full costume, direct address. You both, show me your hands!

The Representative of the Women's League and the Young Woman stand centre on the raised platform.

Young Woman *(Wearing the white silk glove.)* My lady's hand is white.

The two women simultaneously display the revolutionary signal with their gloved hands.

Speaker *(To the audience.)* **Beauty and depravity: more breeds more.**

⁶⁹ The line in Arabic puns on the name of Thuraya and the word for revolution, 'Thowra'.

Shield your eyes and open your hearts: freedom is a city with many points of entry.

*The Speaker turns all the available lighting sources in the direction of the audience, blinding them. Loud Qur'an verses, 56– 58 of Surat al Anfal (The Spoils of War): 'Those of them with whom thou madest a treaty, and then at every opportunity they break their treaty, and they keep not duty (to Allah). If thou comest on them in the war, deal with them so as to strike fear in those who are behind them, that haply they may remember. And if thou fearest treachery from any folk, then throw back to them (their treaty) fairly. Lo! Allah loveth not the treacherous.'*⁷⁰

Scene Four

An Orange Grove, sublimely conceived.

Envoy Enter Nishami. She lays the forged letter into the Mullah's path.

Nishami *A greased skewer.*

Faris, Tagtiga and Nishami hide behind the orange trees.

Speaker Enter the Mullah.

Mullah *O, to sire you now, Thuraya.*

Tagtiga *(Aside.) There is a crime in me, waiting to leap out.*

Mullah *It's not unknown, love knows not society.*

Tagtiga *(Aside.) A crime in me that needs a knife.*

Mullah *A morning like this morning, having been three months married to Thuraya—*

Tagtiga *(Aside.) They preach not what they do!*

Mullah *I'd come from a day bed where I have left her sleeping—*

Envoy The Mullah sees the letter.

Mullah *What's this? (Reading the letter.) 'Signal to me, but do not speak in words; prattle and coo as do lovebirds.' A riddle!*

Nishami *The rat rides the skewer.*

Tagtiga *Excellent woman.*

Rep. Writers' Union *(To the Representative of the Student Union.) Sing us a song.*

⁷⁰ Translated by Marmaduke Pickthall, *The Qur'an*, Everyman's Library.

He sings from 'Ya wardatan fi khayyali' (O rose in my imagination) by Farid Al Atrash. The atmosphere is reminiscent of an Egyptian silver screen classic from the 1950s. The voice reading the letter, in keeping with this aesthetic, dissolves into the voice of the beloved, Thuraya.

Mullah (Reading.) *'Your immutability has driven me to this confession. Lands have been liberated from their oppressors – so why not bodies, too? I've signalled my inclination towards you ceaselessly, but how slow and thick blooded you are.'*

Young Woman (Imitating Thuraya's voice.) *When will you learn the language of the other?*

The Representative of the Tourist Board is startled, but resumes his reading eagerly.

Mullah *Cast your chains of servility asunder, better be deemed ridiculous than be reviled, what others call madness is to me modernity; show yourself to me; be modern, be brave.*

Young Woman (Imitating Thuraya's voice.) *Speak in the language of power: in the language of the mind, in the language of lovers – speak English, Italian, Cantonese, French: show me the gift of your tongue.*

Rep. Tourist Board (To the Speaker.) *That's improvised – but I like it!*

Mullah (Reading.) *'Yours, One who dares to imagine and longs to see.'*

From this point onwards, it is no longer clear whether the Representative of the Tourist Board is speaking as the Mullah from the 1963 script, or as himself, improvising.

Rep. Tourist Board *She's ill and I am the cure: she's lost, and I'm her guide ... Historical opportunity crossed with individual genius – this is how revolutions are made. Thuraya's breast in one hand, the keys to the state in the other: no contradiction anywhere. A dictionary! I need a dictionary!*

Rep. Writers' Union (Offering his services, in Italian.) *Sono io!*

Rep. Tourist Board *Ah, sono io – stay close, I'll be needing you.*

Exit Representative of the Tourist Board.

Tagtiga (To Nishami.) *I could marry you for this.*

Faris *Me too.*

Rep. Tourist Board (Off.) *Envoys! Help me get dressed!*

Nishami *You called, Mullah darling? Exit Nishami.*

Tagtiga *Move! I've fallen in love!*

Rep. Council of Virtue *(To the audience.) Sorry, sorry. (Addressing the surveillance camera, in Arabic.)* The text was altered, tampered with during the last scene. I have said what my duty and conscience dictate. That's it, thanks.

Enter Thuraya and Fawz, strolling in the orange grove.

Thuraya *Do you know how to cast spells?*

Fawz *On who?*

Thuraya *Women.*

Fawz *Women have a spell cast on them from birth.*

Thuraya *Poor things!*

Faw *However hard a woman tries, she will always be the prey, never the predator.*

Thuraya *Explain yourself.*

Fawz *If they're pretty they're the prey of men, if they're ugly they're the prey of other women, and if they're clever they are their own worst enemy.*

Thuraya *Then a woman can only be predator to another woman?*

Fawz *That's correct.*

Thuraya *Then explain this to me.*

Fawz *What?*

Thuraya *This! Here you are, a fully grown – to my eyes – man, in my garden and I have every intention of preying upon you!*

Fawz *I am my master's servant.*

Thuraya *Don't mention him again!*

Fawz *My master intends to prey on you—*

Thuraya *Answer my question and look at me! Yes, like that.*

Fawz *You are exploiting the class difference between us. You are a lady: I am a servant. You are merely replicating the forms of male predation in the social sphere. In this garden you are the man, I am the woman.*

Thuraya *Do you think it would matter to me if you were a woman? Don't answer.*

A recorded fanfare from the 1963 play announces the entry of the Mullah. The envoys involved in the 'plot' take up their positions in the laboratory-turned-orange grove.

Scene Five, the Fall – a glocal comedy

Enter the Representative of the Tourist Board as the Mullah. He is dressed in a loud, purple suit, orange tie, beardless, holding a hairdryer.

Mullah *Thoo-Thoo?*

Thuraya *Mullah Farhan!*

Mullah *I beg you, Thoo-Thoo, call me Foo Foo. I want to show you my gifts!*

Thuraya *What have you done to yourself?*

Mullah *Broken them! The chains of servility cast asunder!*

Thuraya *You look ridiculous.*

Mullah *Better ridiculous than reviled!*

Thuraya *Are you mad?*

Mullah *What to others is madness is to me simply modern! I bring you signs.*

Thuraya *What signs?*

Sticks out his tongue and wiggles it. One of the envoys signals to him not to improvise in this manner, but the Representative of the Tourist Board is cavalier and unconcerned.

Thuraya *You seem not yourself.*

Mullah *This is my new self!*

Thuraya *Perhaps you should go to bed?*

Mullah *To bed!*

The Representative of the Tourist Board, intent on seducing the Representative of the Women's League with his skills in foreign languages, consults with the Representative of the Writers' League and other envoys, repeating what is dictated to him in languages he does not comprehend. He derives a childlike thrill from this exercise, while the Representative of the Women's League duly incites him with lustful energy to go further in his linguistic odyssey.

Rep. Writers' Union *(Whispering) Si, si amore, facciamolo!*⁷¹

⁷¹ Italian: 'Yes, yes, my darling! Let's do it!'

Rep. Tourist Board *(To the Representative of the Women's League.)* Si, si amore, facciamolo!

The Representative of the Women's League responds to this improvisation with lusty glee.

Mullah *I bring you a second sign.*

Thuraya *Of what?*

Mullah *My affection.*

Thuraya *A hairdryer?*

Mullah *Sechoir!*

Thuraya *What for?*

Rep. Writers' Union *(Whispering.)* C'est trop chic. J'adore les femmes aux têtes nues.⁷²
(It's so chic. I love women with bare heads.)

Rep. Tourist Board *(To the Representative of the Women's League.)* C'est trop chic. J'adore les femmes aux têtes nues.

Thuraya *Give it to Nishami.*

Rep. Students Union *(Whispering.)* 将其插入⁷³

Rep. Tourist Board *(To the Speaker.)* Don't get too clever.

Young Woman *(Whispering.)* Your love is oppression!

Rep. Tourist Board Your love is oppression!

Young Woman I cannot live under oppression!

Rep. Tourist Board I cannot live under oppression!

Young Woman I want to ...

Rep. Tourist Board I want to ...

Young Woman Defect!

Rep. Tourist Board *(Suspicious, in Arabic.)* What is 'defect'?

The Representative of the Writers' Union clenches his fist and pulses the air, insinuating

⁷² French : 'It's so chic. I love women with bare heads.'

⁷³ Chinese: 'Plug it in!'

sexual intercourse.

Rep. Tourist Board O!! (*Turns to the Representative of the Womens' League for confirmation. She mimes a second sexual act.*) No! (*Turns to the Young Woman for confirmation, who mimes a third, more explicit, sexual act.*) Ah! Thoo-Thoo: (*In English.*) **I want to defect! You, me de-fect! Me, you defect! Defect two times! Ten times! Defect, defect, DEFECT!**

The music stops. We hear the sound of a woman panting through a microphone. The Representative of the Writers' Union, armed with a clipboard, stands above the kneeling Representative of the Tourist Board, judge-like.

Rep. Writers' Union To defect, a disertare al nemico, passer à l'ennemi?

Rep. Tourist Board Yes, according to the path and sunna of the Prophet, Peace be upon Him!

Young Woman A traitor and proud of it!

The sound of a heavy cage rolling is heard.

Rep. Writers' Union You made a public plea for political asylum in a foreign city. You are an agent of the enemies of the state.

Rep. Tourist Board (*Realizing, then to the surveillance camera.*) No, no, I was tricked. No!!

Speaker **Second Musical Interlude!**

The Sound Technician plays a vinyl record – Andy Williams' 'Music to Watch Girls By' or 'Balghi Kull Mowaidi' by Mulhim Barakat and Georgette Sayigh – the envoys dance, throw confetti and lead the Representative of the Tourist Board, blindfolded, into the cage. As the cage door is slammed, the record needle slips and screeches.

Rep. Tourist Board Rats!

Rep. Writers' Union Fuck you!

Speaker **We continue the reconstruction of the decadent play! The next scene, blind fool on the seashore: prophecy of death.**

Bell announces the start of the reconstruction. The Representative of the Council of Virtue as Feylooti the Blind Fool, strikes a sea drum and sings.

Feylooti *Of what my eyes have seen, I sing:
Birds of death fly hovering,
Mothers looking for their sons,
Sons begging for guns
To kill their fathers ... Under the sand
The earth's black lungs Exhale dragons.*

The Counter Revolution: in which the laboratory seeks to annihilate the rebel envoys. The lights cut out momentarily. A weighted rope swings across the stage, knocking over a lab table. A plug blows on the Sound Technician's desk, the Speaker's light flickers. The smoke machine erupts. A lighting bar flies in above the stage. The Speaker steps away from his position as a sandbag, intended to assassinate him, falls where he had been standing. The stage falls into darkness and the sound of more stage equipment falling and collapsing is heard. Screams, distress, then silence. The Representative of the Tourist Board, inside the cage, laughs derisively.

Act Three, the Conclusions

The Deep State, Scene One

The sound of a generator brings the lights back up, reduced, altered. Sand falls in thin trails onto the destroyed posts of the laboratory.

Speaker **Violence poisons the imagination** – *(To the Representative of the Tourist Board.)* you dog!

Rep. Tourist Board The camera is filming everything!

Former Actress I'll rip it out.

Speaker Leave it. *(To the Representative of the Tourist Board, pulling him from the cage.)* You are in character, the text is perfectly intact, our commission runs through its phases, like a river beneath a city under siege. Into the torture scene – a truly Shakespearean moment! *(Throws him onto the raised platform.)*

The Young Woman enters with the Mullah's whipping stick and the hairdryer.

Nishami *Peace unto the prisoners.*

Mullah *Who's there?*

Nishami *The People.*

Mullah *My people!*

Nishami *Who come to ogle at their oppressor and exact justice without pity.*

Mullah *Women and foreigners have deceived us all; release me and all will be forgiven.*

Nishami *Will you talk of nothing but women and foreigners! She beats him on his ankles with the stick.*

Mullah *I deny all the charges in their entirety.*

Young Woman Will you deny: move to A4, leap to B6, crawl to D3. Will you deny 90 centimetres?

Rep. Tourist Board She's improvising!

Young Woman Can you deny stabbing a girl in the womb for offering you a flower!

Mullah *You are blinded by the lights of chaotic freedom, you are in a terrible darkness.*

Nishami *You lie!*

Mullah *You will create only darkness.*

Nishami *YOU LIE!*

She beats him with his stick and burns him with the hairdryer.

Nishami *Now I want to cut your ears and then your fingers and then your revolutionary organ.*

Mullah *For every drop of my blood, I will poison a million children.*

Nishami *Q. for question: what is the opinion of the fallen dictator towards his crimes?*

Mullah *That his actions were a necessity to fight the forces of radical Islam and prevent sectarian civil war.*

Nishami *Q. for question: what do you say of this?*

Rep. Tourist Board I say when the sand runs out, you will weep and beg for mercy when there is no mercy to be had.

She whips him hard, exhausts herself whipping. He lifts himself up from a broken position, a colossus rising, and removes the headscarf that was blindfolding him.

Nishami *(Hysterically.) Remain in darkness: the desert is thirsty for skulls like yours.*

Mullah *(Mocking.) My people, my people, my people!*

The Representative of the Tourist Board collects his folders and files from his station. The Young Woman, with her booted foot, marks the rhythm of the chant 'Al Sha'ab Yurid Isqat Al Nidham' – 'The people demand the fall of the regime' – the signature slogan of the Arab popular uprisings.

Mullah *I will be revenged upon the pack of you.*

The Young Woman stops marking the rhythm of the chant. She lowers the zip of her boots and

removes them. Picks up the headscarf, shakes it until it is straight, wraps it around her head and face leaving only her eyes exposed. She leaves the stage barefoot. The Representative of the Writers' Union moves onto the raised platform and retrieves the boots with great sadness.

Scene Two

The Representative of the Council of Virtue enters angrily, dressed in the full costume of the Ruler.

Rep. Student Union Wrong costume, it's the Blind Fool scene now.

Rep. Council of Virtue No more Blind Fool, the Blind Fool is no more! *(He rips a page from his script.)*

Speaker *(Retrieving the page.)* By removing this page, you're inciting us to compose a new ending.

Rep. Council of Virtue *(Defiantly holding his script.)* I dare you!

Speaker *(To the Representative of the Writers' Union, slumped in a chair, fatigued.)* Please, don't tire now.

A bell announces the start of the scene.

Ruler *This woman, your niece – Thuraya.*

Tagtiga *Thuraya, yes.*

Ruler *Is central to my agenda.*

Tagtiga *Central.*

Ruler *She is the text of our desire.*

Tagtiga *Yes, the very text.*

Ruler *Our desire is to place her name onto my tongue and pronounce it mine.*

Tagtiga *Yours.*

Rep. Writers' Union This text is seditious.

Rep. Council of Virtue *(To the surveillance camera.)* I don't trust this man.

Rep. Writers' Union *(Continuing in a whisper.)* It will give us no answers.

Speaker It was written by an Englishman, five hundred years ago.

We've come so far, we need to—

Rep. Council of Virtue I don't ask questions.

Rep. Writers' Union Let's continue.

Rep. Council of Virtue B3! Move into B3!

Tagtiga *My Lord, my master—*

Ruler *Take this car.*

Tagtiga *I take the car.*

Ruler *Take this house.*

Tagtiga *I take the house.*

Ruler *Bring her to me! Make her succumb to my will.*

Tagtiga *Thuraya, my niece, has ... how can I tell you ... she has shamed me, the family and the seat of Power.*

Ruler *How?*

Tagtiga *She's betrayed you to your messenger.*

Ruler *My messenger?*

Tagtiga *The Poet.*

Ruler *The outsider?*

Tagtiga *She loves Fawz ...*

Rep. Writers' Union Do you know Fawz? Fawz that set her body alight in the square—

Ruler *I have no knowledge of this.*

Rep. Writers' Union Fawz that took a bullet to her heart and made a spring for millions to quench their thirst from—

Ruler *I have no knowledge of this!*

Rep. Writers' Union Who scribbles her name on school walls and chants it through a year of Fridays—

Ruler *My love is as hungry as the sea! It digests as much.*

Rep. Writers' Union Will your children drink seawater! Leave the women to their destinies, let them mouth the vowels of the sea.

Rep. Council of Virtue I've not lost my respect for authority, you bastards!

Rep. Writers' Union Pointless. My lord and master, fuck you too!

Rep. Council of Virtue (*Furious.*) You – out! Out!

The Representative of the Writers' Union exits the stage.

Rep. Council of Virtue (*To Former Actress.*) It's the last scene, get into position!

Former Actress The last scene.

Rep. Council of Virtue Bell!

The bell is sounded.

Ruler *I thought you were too young but I see betrayal knows no age.*

Fawz *Never!*

Ruler *Tell me, how does she kiss?*

Fawz *Impossible!*

Ruler *Her lips, are they coy or wanton? I want to cut your balls off!*

Fawz *I don't—*

Ruler *Talk!*

Fawz *I can't betray you.*

Ruler *Palpably false!*

Fawz *I love you.*

Ruler (*Sings the schoolboy anthem mockingly.*) 'God, my country, my ruler!'

Fawz *I'm not ... what I ... I'm not a man.*

Ruler *You're a coward and a traitor!*

Fawz *No ... I'm ... a woman.*

Ruler *What did you say?*

Fawz *My name is Fawzia.*

Ruler *Prove it.*

Fawz undoes her male garments, releases her hair. She sings a love song. The Representative of the Council of Virtue raises his sleeve, shows his hand to the Speaker.

Rep. Council of Virtue A new ending? I'll give you one. Now.

Speaker I've waited for this moment for so many years.

The Representative of the Council of Virtue offers his hand to the Former Actress. She tries to take it in her own, he corrects her assumption and lays his hand gently on her throat; she accepts.

Ruler *For your service done and since you called me master for so long, here is my hand. Men! Thuraya's prize is concluded: write this girl a cheque for 40 days' worth of oil; she sang the song I wanted to hear.*

Attendant *Shall we record the song?*

Ruler *I have no more need for music.*

The Representative of the Council of Virtue grips the Former Actress's throat and begins to strangle her. The Representative of the Women's League tries to undo his grasp.

Rep. Women's League He's killing her! Help me!

Speaker I can't move. I'm paralysed.

The Representative of the Student Union withdraws from the stage, terrified. The Representative of the Council of Virtue releases the Former Actress.

Rep. Council of Virtue *(To the Speaker.)* I don't want Shakespeare, I don't want politics, I don't want theatre. No more art. I swear, by God, by my father, by my children, I swear, I have no more need for it. Each of you will be silent, silent as the grave. *(Removes the surveillance camera.)* You saw nothing. You heard nothing. Silent as the grave. Shh ... Or I'll kill you, one by one, with a spade. *(Exits.)*

Pause. Silence.

Speaker *(To the audience.)*

Since I was a boy, the night whispered in my ear:
I, the night, am your script and your director
I am your narrative and your scenes;
Without me you are hyenas devouring hyenas.
Since I was a boy, the day made a habit to bellow:
I, the day, am your light and your grid
I am your curtain and your stage;

Without me you are savages Inheriting chaos.

**Then, in the passage of a night and a day
All the picture frames fell apart
And inside the bellies of 18-year-olds that fear not death
History hoofed its horses
And in the teeth, fists and spit of the ruck
They held up a corpse and named it ‘fear’.
‘The fear has gone,’ they said ...
Fear, then, only fear’s ghosts.**

**Farewell, I.
O happy, happy wreck:
Progress is done.**

Exit Speaker, followed by the Sound Technician/Musician.

Scene Three

The light dies slowly across the duration of the scene.

Rep. Women’s League We’re damned by words.

Pause.

Former Actress Remember the scene I read to you?

Rep. Women’s League Which one?

Former Actress The dream, the one the young writer brought, the cute one,
you know the one, it doesn’t matter, just try to remember, will you?

Rep. Women’s League Yes.

Former Actress Say it, before the sand runs out.

Rep. Women’s League What for?

Former Actress Just say it with me.

Pause.

Rep. Women’s League Tell me your name, without shame, without fear?

Former Actress My name is Amal Omran.⁷⁴

⁷⁴ The name and birthplace of the Former Actress should be adapted to suit the name and birthplace of the performer playing the role.

Rep. Women's League	Where are you from?
Former Actress	I'm from a village called Sadaf. I can't see you.
Rep. Women's League	Tell me your mother's name, without shame, without fear?
Former Actress	My mother's name was Fatima. Yours?
Rep. Women's League	Marianne. I can't see you.
Former Actress without shame, without fear.	Seeing's not everything. Describe the colour of your eyes
Rep. Women's League	My eyes are the colour of coffee with a drop of milk. Yours?
Former Actress	The colour of earth after rain.
Rep. Women's League	I can't see you.
Former Actress shame, without fear?	Does it matter? Tell me what you do not know without
Rep. Women's League	I'm ignorant of most things. But—
Former Actress	Have you tasted love? I'm drowning. I thought I could re- create myself, lose myself in the city ...
Rep. Women's League	We will step out of this tower, beyond the line of the sun ...
Former Actress	Live a hundred lives in the passage of a night.
Rep. Women's League	Past the men with patches on their eyes—
Former Actress	I thought life was an orchard of pomegranates—
Rep. Women's League	And wear our freedom like a new spring dress—
Former Actress	And time, a basket in my hand ...
Rep. Women's League knives.	It's material as thin as butterflies' wings ... untouched by
<i>Pause.</i>	
Former Actress head!	<i>(Laughing suddenly.)</i> It's stupid – I have a stupid song in my
Rep. Women's League	<i>(Laughing with her.)</i> Sing it!
Former Actress	But how shall we live?

Rep. Women's League I want to fly.

The sand falling from above runs empty. The darkness is entire.

End